ELECTRONIC SOUND

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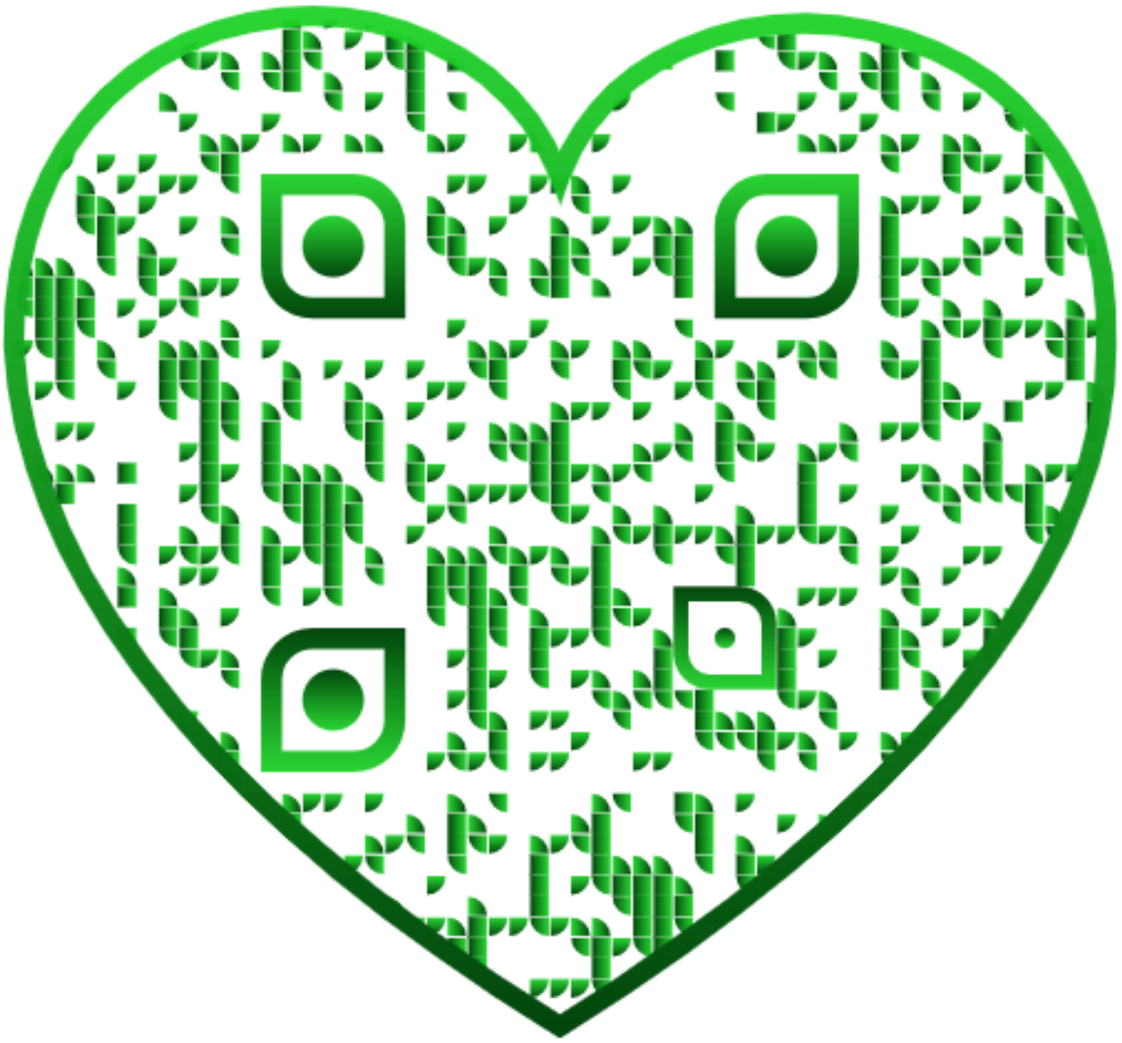
SIMPLE MINDS

FORCES OF NATURE

LUCRECIA DALT / JOE MEEK / THE UMLAUTS / CARL COX / HALINA RICE / WARRINGTON-RUNCORN...

GREAT MINDS



WELCOME TO ELECTRONIC SOUND

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A sinister gas mask covered in beautiful flowers prompts a lot of questions, especially given the troubling times that we've been going through in recent years and seem set to keep going through for a while yet. The work of acclaimed designer Stuart Crouch, we have borrowed this striking image from the cover of the new Simple Minds album, 'Direction Of The Heart', a record that sees the band returning to their art rock and electronic roots. We think it's their best album since their 1980s heyday, so we're delighted to have an in-depth interview with Simple Minds mainstays Jim Kerr and Charlie Burchill as this month's lead feature.

Kerr and Burchill describe 'Direction Of The Heart' as a "feel-good record" and it's most certainly high on energy, packed with big waves of synths and sharp guitar lines. But while there's plenty of positivity in the lyrics, there are lots of dark undertows as well. The resulting tension brings us back to that dramatic cover image and is just one of the many interesting aspects of the album. The highlights include a track called 'Act Of Love', which the band wrote no less than 45 years ago. It was the first song they played at their first gig, which took place at the legendary Satellite City in Glasgow all the way back in January 1978.

'Direction Of The Heart' comes at the end of what has been another extremely busy year for Simple Minds, who must be one of the hardest-working outfits in the music business. They clocked up more than 80 live shows across 16 European countries between February and August, performing a set lasting two-and-a-half hours. Bearing in mind that Kerr and Burchill are both now in their 60s, they truly are forces of nature. And then some.

Our other main articles this issue include the incredible story of Joe Meek's "tea chest tapes" – almost 2,000 individual 10-inch reels – a small selection of which have finally seen the light of day after being hidden away for decades. Elsewhere in the magazine, we also have interviews with Lucrecia Dalt, Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan, The Umlauts and Halina Rice, while the one and only Carl Cox is in the spotlight for our regular Under The Influence feature. Crate digging and drag racing – the Santa Pod kind, not the RuPaul kind – are both on his list. And if that's not a grand day out, we don't know what is.

Electronically yours,
Push and Mark

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LORAINE JAMES X LCO

Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre, London

2 OCTOBER 2022

WORDS: STEPHEN DALTON
PICTURE: PETE WOODHEAD

Rounding off a prolific year of side projects and bold new tangents, Loraine James moved further into modern classical terrain with this prestigious appearance at London's Southbank Centre. An album launch with strings attached, this one-off collaboration between Enfield's left-field electronica queen and the London Contemporary Orchestra marks the first public airing for one of the standout albums of 2022. On 'Building Something Beautiful For Me', James pays imaginative homage to the late minimalist composer and performance artist Julius Eastman by sampling, splicing and artfully reworking his underrated canon. While the album is largely electronic, the show unfolds across a luxuriant bed of strings and woodwind, with mostly delicious results.

Backing into the limelight as ever, James modestly huddles over her workstation in one corner of the stage, barely speaking all night aside from the odd nervous line and low-voltage vocal. With no conductor present, she is effectively in charge of the 15-strong orchestra, and they turn in a lively performance as vigorously bowed vibraphones, vertiginous massed glissandos and frenetic pizzicato strings gamely try to replicate the knotty, glitchy percussion of jazz-tronica tracks such as 'My Take'.

The LCO are seasoned collaborators across multiple genres, and they provide James with pleasing shifts in texture and tempo. Smooth legato strings dominate, and they mostly play in unison, creating a maximal effect that feels lush and immersive on ghostly ambient moodscapes like 'Building Something Beautiful For Me (Holy Presence Of Joan D'Arc)'.

Julius Eastman was a collaborator with avant-disco pioneer Arthur Russell, another genre-bending queer artist who died too young, and Russell's spirit seems to hover over this performance at times. There are certainly eerie echoes of his dreamy, narcotic, otherworldly croon in James' sparing vocals, as she layers looped phrases and lines – live and pre-recorded – to woozily hypnotic effect on 'Maybe If I (Stay On It)' and 'Choose To Be Gay (Femenine)'. The parallel is heightened by string arrangements that inescapably evoke the fuzzy-warm quality of Russell's own electroacoustic cello pieces.

One of many highlight tracks is 'Enfield, Always', a gleaming rush of crystalline synth ripples and rolling arpeggios that gathers momentum into a locomotive rhythm before unravelling abruptly into sparks and shimmers. The album version glows and glides, but this expanded orchestral arrangement has a full-bodied and radiant richness that feels irresistible. And 'Black Excellence (Stay On It)' is a gloriously anthemic climax, as stabbing strings underpin a hard-edged, electro-rave gallop.

Overall, it's a fabulous evening, but the bald presentation is a little disappointing. James is a pretty introverted performer, of course, but a line or two about Eastman, a brief explanation of the album concept and a hint of historical context would have been very welcome. The QEH may be a sober classical music venue, but this rare, pan-generational celebration of radical queer blackness deserved maximum fuss and fanfare. Hell, I'd have settled for a mirrorball and a few balloons. All the same, as James continues to stretch her creative wings and break new musical ground, this fruitful collaboration added some very welcome new colours to her rainbow.

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Simple Minds
‘I Travel’ / ‘Planet Zero’
Magenta vinyl seven-inch

Simple Minds mainstays Jim Kerr and Charlie Burchill talk us through the two tracks on this month’s exclusive seven-inch – ‘I Travel’ from ‘Empires And Dance’ and ‘Planet Zero’ from their new album, ‘Direction Of The Heart’

‘I TRAVEL’

Jim Kerr: “We’d spent the summer going around Europe when we wrote ‘I Travel’. We were wondering if we were jinxed because wherever we went there were problems with people like the Baader-Meinhof Group and the Red Brigades. There was one night where we stayed in a cheap motel next to where a bomb went off at a synagogue. At the time, I saw my lyrics as being like taking snapshots of the things we saw and did, so they were kind of fantastical but based on reality.”

Charlie Burchill: “There are a lot of things about the track that are really peculiar. There are no drum fills on it and I don’t think there are any cymbals. But we were very conscious of that. That’s what we wanted. I know some people say ‘I Travel’ was way ahead of its time, but I don’t know if I agree with that. Let’s be honest here, Giorgio Moroder had been doing stuff like this for years.”

Kerr: “One of the most interesting things for me is there’s quite a brooding atmosphere to this and also to some of the other songs on the ‘Empires And Dance’ album. I mean, it’s almost claustrophobic, but at the same time you can dance to it.”

Burchill: “‘Empires And Dance’ was a bit of a hodgepodge of everything. It was great fun to make, but we didn’t really know what we were doing. And then later on, looking back on certain tracks you think, ‘Oh, that actually happened and we managed to get something there, didn’t we?’. So it was just luck sometimes, but you have an attitude and you get somewhere as a result of that. We didn’t think of ‘I Travel’ as a big track at the time, but I see it as a real statement now.”

‘PLANET ZERO’

Burchill: “There’s a definite echo between ‘I Travel’ and ‘Planet Zero’. They both have sequencers and quite heavy guitars. They could be bookends, you know, from one period of time to another.”

Kerr: “Our songs almost always start with Charlie, they start with the music, and then my lyrics are a response to that. Rarely do I sit down, quill in hand, and think, ‘OK, here are the thoughts of Chairman Jim’. I just hear things in what Charlie does. As well as the melodic content, his music has these strong atmospheres, so I work on the pictures that form in my head to get a lyrical riff that fits with what he’s doing.”

Burchill: “This might sound bizarre, but I think that the main guitar line of ‘Planet Zero’ is like an African highlife melody. It’s got a bit of King Sunny Ade to it. But at the same time, the track has a space-age, space rock vibe to it as well. I’m a big fan of spacey psychedelic stuff. I loved Hawkwind, for instance. I had all of their albums. The first time I heard ‘Silver Machine’, I remember thinking I had to have it. I spent ages trying to figure out how they got that fantastic sound.”

Kerr: “We had an early draft of this track going back eight or nine years ago, maybe more. There were lots of riots around London at the time. We were in a little basement studio in Tottenham with Steve Hillage, Mr Intergalactic, who we’d worked with back in the day, and it was all going off outside the door. We’d just come back from Europe and it was kicking off there as well. There seemed to be chaos everywhere, so that’s what the line ‘A whole world of fire’ is about. I’m actually beginning to wonder if perhaps there’s always chaos everywhere.”

THE FRONT

3 Welcome
4 Opening Shot
6 Reader Offer
11 Damsel Elysium
12 ‘A Year In The Country’
14 Carl Cox
16 Needs Must
18 Thomas Fehlmann
21 Pale Stranger
22 Lukasz Polowczyk
23 Dilettante
24 No Bounds Festival
25 Mörmaid
26 Richard Barratt
30 Enigmas
32 Death Hags, Save Our Sounds

FEATURES

36 Simple Minds
50 Lucrecia Dalt
56 Joe Meek
60 Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan
66 Halina Rice
70 The Umlauts

THE BACK

74 Plaid

76 Loula Yorke, Ami Dang, Nicolas Bougaïeff, Ernest Hood

77 Seahawks, un.procedure, Burd Ellen, Maastricht Research

78 Shabason & Krgovich, Bibio, Nueen, From Overseas & City Of Dawn

79 Asher Levitas, The Umlauts, rRoxymore, Yosa Peit

80 Svaneborg Kardyb, Biensüre, Fenella, Diane Barbé

81 Kayla Painter, Rural Tapes, Dave Clarkson, Craven Faults

82 Dorian Concept, Rainy Miller, Carla Dal Forno, Leverton Fox

83 Dead Voices On Air, Lomond Campbell, boerd, Mister Water Wet

84 Infinity Room, Léo Kupper, Vaal, Montparnasse Musique

85 Elizabete Balčus, WMTID, Mehmet Aslan, Solar Corona

86 Daniel Avery, µ-Ziq, To Rococo Rot

87 Sarathy Korwar, Pedro Vian & Mana, Modified Toy Orchestra

88 Sunda Arc, Sharron Kraus, The Human League

89 Helen Ganya

90 Sandra Cross, Acid Klaus

91 ‘Eins Und Zwei Und Drei Und Vier Vol 2’, Sinemis, Decius

92 Cerrone, Mabe Fratti, Coh Meets Abul Mogard

93 Pie Eye Collective, Injazero

94 Richie Culver

95 Christina Vantzou, LMX, Sulk Rooms

96 The Leaf Library, ‘Beirut Adrift’, Gigi Masin

97 Recoil, Björk

98 Fat Roland

COMEBACK KING

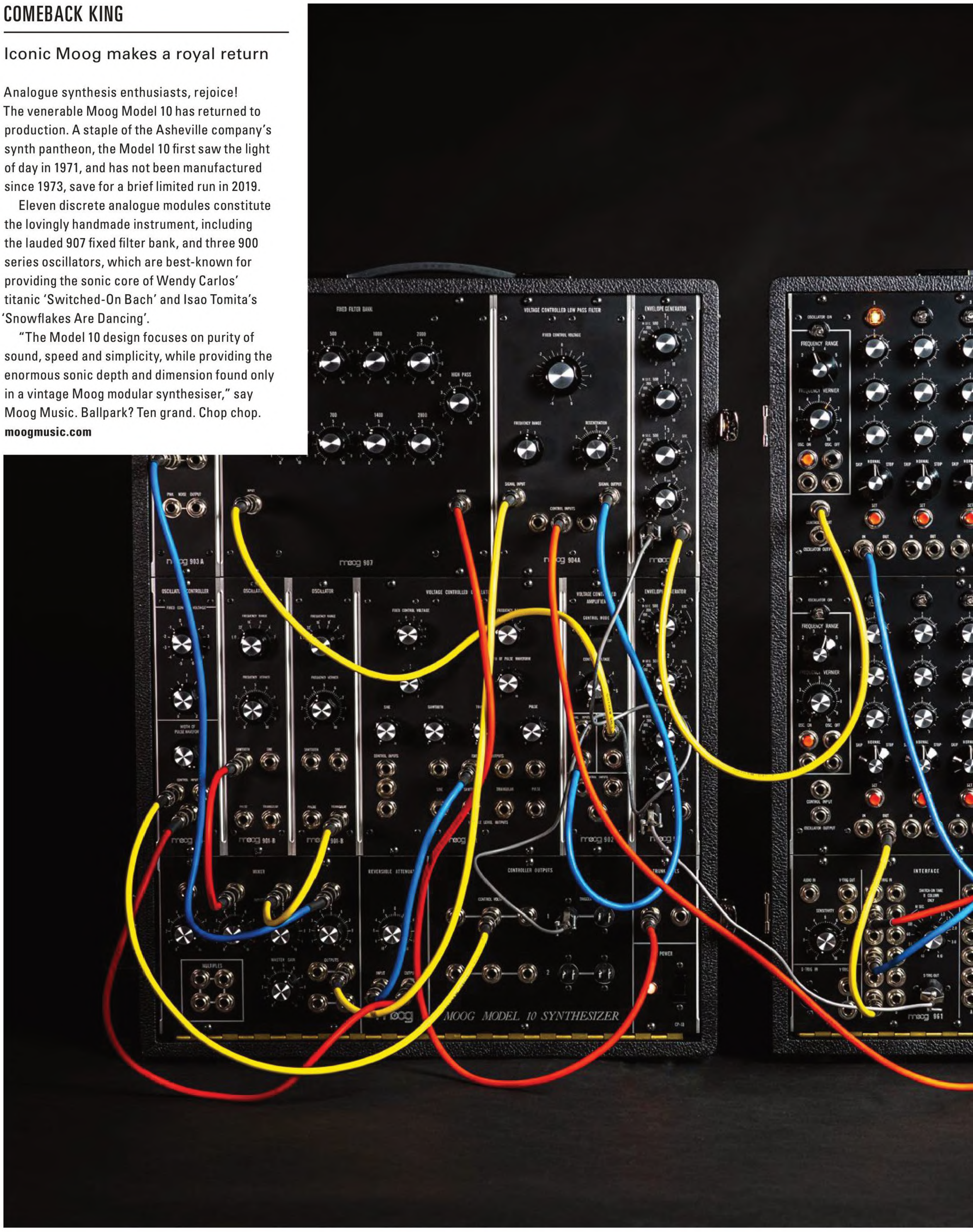
Iconic Moog makes a royal return

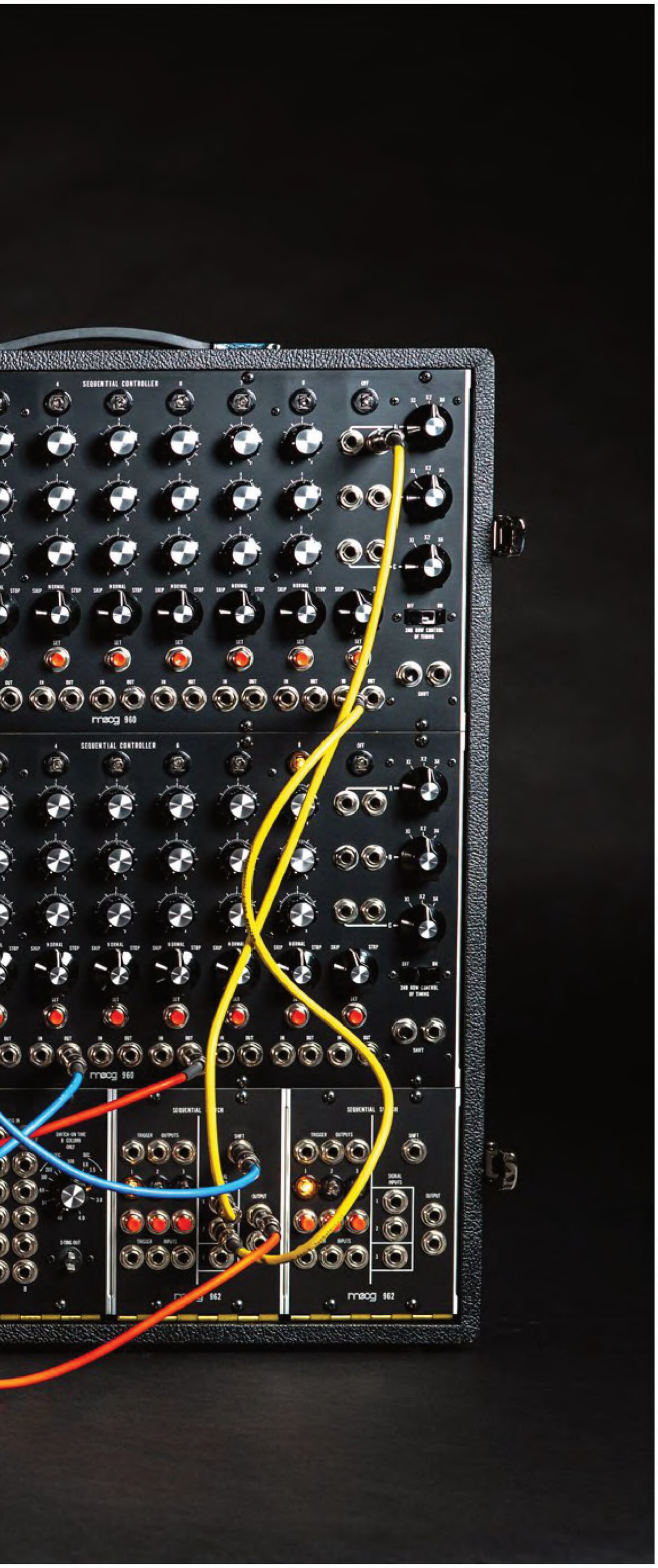
Analogue synthesis enthusiasts, rejoice! The venerable Moog Model 10 has returned to production. A staple of the Asheville company's synth pantheon, the Model 10 first saw the light of day in 1971, and has not been manufactured since 1973, save for a brief limited run in 2019.

Eleven discrete analogue modules constitute the lovingly handmade instrument, including the lauded 907 fixed filter bank, and three 900 series oscillators, which are best-known for providing the sonic core of Wendy Carlos' titanic 'Switched-On Bach' and Isao Tomita's 'Snowflakes Are Dancing'.

"The Model 10 design focuses on purity of sound, speed and simplicity, while providing the enormous sonic depth and dimension found only in a vintage Moog modular synthesiser," say Moog Music. Ballpark? Ten grand. Chop chop.

moogmusic.com





PULSE

DAMSEL ELYSIUM

Fashion-conscious multi-instrumentalist

WHO?

Damsel Elysium is a 21-year-old who sounds and looks like no other. Fittingly, Vogue have already dubbed them "London's most stylish" experimental artist, but this striking figure is no poseur. Already a collaborator with FKA Twigs, and a fine, classically trained multi-instrumentalist who plays double bass, piano and violin, this remarkable north Londoner is also an adept field recordist.

WHY DAMSEL ELYSIUM?

Elysium's latest single, 'Echoes Of Lalia', showcases their rare talent. Its title is a play on echolalia, a condition sometimes associated with people on the autistic spectrum, which is characterised by the repetition of words or phrases uttered by others (literally, "echoes of speech"). It is based on Elysium's experience of perceiving auditory stimuli from a neurodivergent perspective, in a world of perpetual noise and movement. "It can often be difficult to get through a day in the city," says Elysium. However, in moments amid the cacophony, sounds can be encountered that are pleasurable, even transcendental, and these are the moments Elysium wants us to hear.

TELL US MORE...

Their music offers a unique and inclusive insight into the world of differing perceptions, one where abstract physical space connects with nature and light in a fluid way that words cannot convey. A dazzling, near-hallucinatory sound world, 'Echoes Of Lalia' is a dark-hued creation, taking us on a thrilling journey through sound. Beginning with the roaring, heavily manipulated noise of what could be a speeding tube train, but may also be a time-travelling craft spiralling through the dimensions, we experience the comfort of distant, pensive strings, dislocated abstract voices and, somehow, healing warmth. Happening inside a couple of minutes, it comes from the mind of a 21-year-old who clearly knows that trees speak to each other.

CARL GRIFFIN

'Echoes Of Lalia' is out now on SA Recordings

COUNTRY MATTERS

Holed up in some secret, rural idyll, **Stephen Prince** is dedicating his life to exploring the darker side of the pastoral experience. So what began as 'A Year In The Country' has lasted for almost a decade...

WORDS: BOB FISCHER

"Often, rural areas are shown as being isolated, otherly places, and that isolation allows them to create a world unto themselves, free from the influence of the outside world. I wanted the book to focus on films and TV programmes that explored this..."

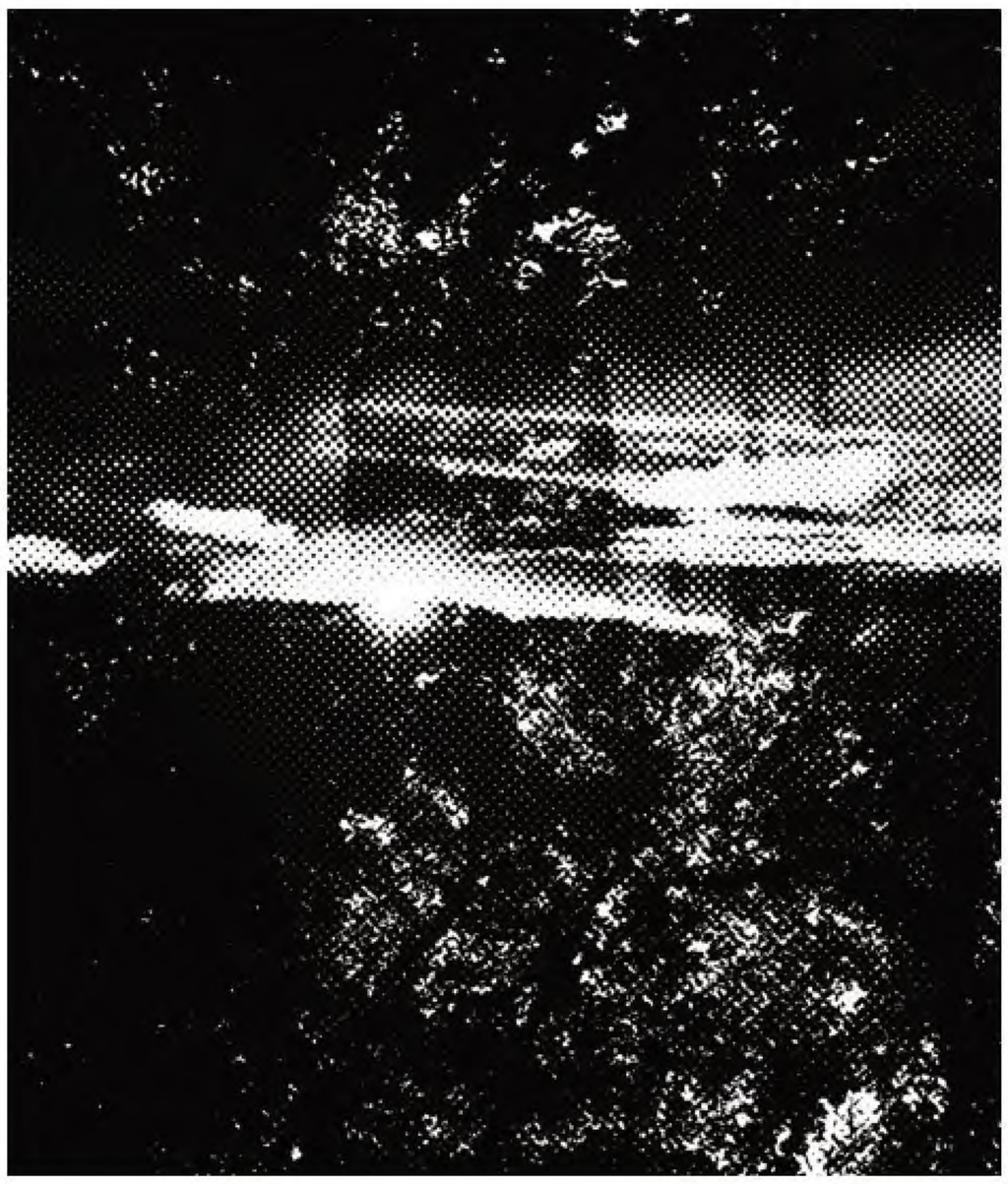
Stephen Prince sounds enthused and ebullient discussing his pet subject. Since 2014, his multimedia project 'A Year In The Country' has delved into the uncannier aspects of the rural experience across a series of hugely enjoyable releases. His excellent new book, 'Cathode Ray And Celluloid Hinterlands', is his third anthology of thoughtful and exhaustively researched essays on the "wyrd" as depicted in popular culture. From big-hitters like 'The Wicker Man' and 'Bagpuss', to relative obscurities (1951 documentary 'Oss Oss Wee Oss', anyone?), it's a collection obsessed with the minutiae of deliciously pastoral disquiet.

"The landscape in Britain often seems layered with myth and history," he continues. "Everywhere you go, it's like you're walking on echoes. Added to that, the stories from the films and TV shows we've watched can seep into those places. The first time I went to Portmeirion, I really wasn't sure if I was in the real world, or on the set of 'The Prisoner'."

This fascination stems from a childhood spent in a tiny Pennine village.

"When you're a kid, you live in that world of imagination," he explains. "In my head, the local river became the scene of battles from 'Doctor Who'. But also... the Cold War was going on.

"I remember being 10, wondering how I could build a nuclear shelter in my room... I literally grew up among Cold War sirens. I had a friend whose family lived in a house that was part of the Tourist Information Centre, and they had one in their front room! So I'd go round with a head full of robots and spaceships, and on their windowsill was a device that, at any moment, might tell me I had four minutes to live before I was incinerated.



"So these were some of the initial seeds that, many decades on, became 'A Year In The Country'."

He talks the talk, but he also walks the walk – presumably along a darkening forest trail, with a wizard's staff in his hand. A decade ago, Stephen swapped metropolitan hurly-burly for a return to country living, and it's clearly been a transformative experience.

"I'd been living and working in some very urban areas," he explains. "And perhaps subconsciously, I was looking for a change. I listened to a friend's copy of the 2004 compilation album 'Gather In The Mushrooms – The British Acid Folk Underground, 1968-74', and it really seemed to open up something in my mind. The same friend also had a copy of Trunk Records' soundtrack to 'The Wicker Man', and through that I somehow stumbled upon Ghost Box Records. A big album for me was The Advisory Circle's 'Mind How You Go'.

I remember listening endlessly to 'And The Cuckoo Comes' from that. So it was like all these things set up new pathways in my mind."

So listening to Ghost Box made him give up the rat race? He pauses.

"It maybe spurred me on. I'd been living in a rural area for a couple of years before I started 'A Year In The Country', and during that time, I was researching a lot, working out how I could interact with some of the atmospheres we've been discussing. It was a new area to explore and enjoy."

Asked to select one example from the latest book that epitomises the strangeness of the British rural experience, he nominates a 1978 instalment of the BBC's 'Play Of The Week' anthology series – a surreal combination of folk horror and science fiction, with regular 'Play School' presenter Toni Arthur in a starring role.

"'Stargazy On Zummerdown'!" exclaims Stephen. "You can't imagine it being commissioned today, even as some kind of fringe theatre production, let alone something on prime time TV! It has political theory combined with Morris dancing, starships, Monty Python-esque gangs of marauding accountants... all set in this utopian, post-apocalyptic world. It's genuinely odd. A real cultural curio.

"And even when programmes like that are distributed on YouTube, there's still a sense of discovering something secret. Nowadays, people are interested in films being restored to crystal-clear high definition – and I'm not knocking that – but these programmes are so different to that. They're blurry, smeared, and a bit grimy. It's almost like they've become spectral versions of themselves..."

'A Year In The Country: Cathode Ray And Celluloid Hinterlands' is out now

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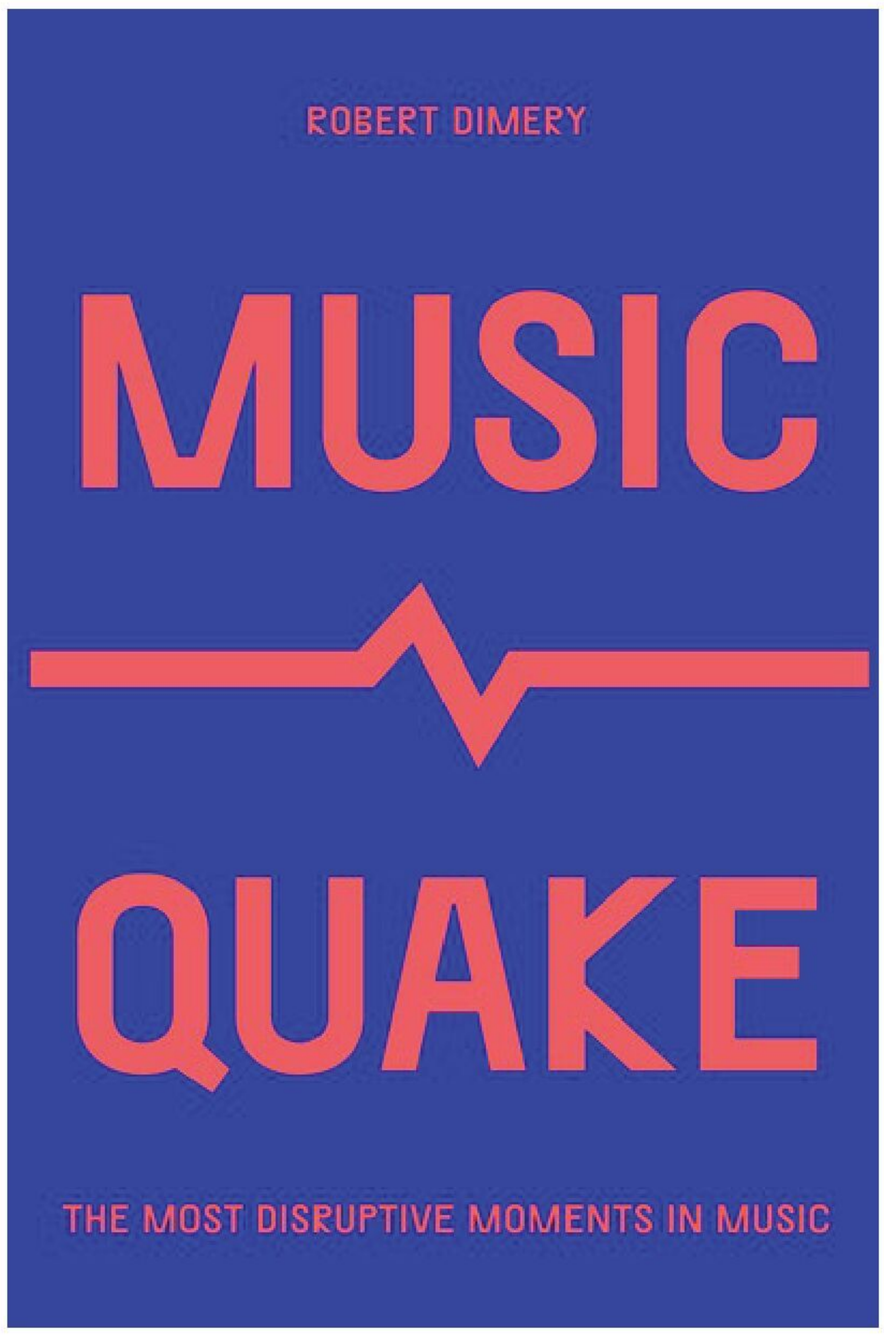
SEISMIC SHIFTS

Tome charts the biggest shake-ups in music

'MusicQuake: The Most Disruptive Moments In Music' is a book that does what it says on the tin, telling the stories of 50 pivotal artists, albums, performances and events that shook the world. Featuring pieces such as Stockhausen's lesser-known 'Gesang Der Jünglinge' (1956) to the more obvious punk perennial, the Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy In The UK' (1976), each entry is discussed in depth within the context of its creation, providing genuine insight into what made these moments so important. And you're in safe hands with author Robert Dimery, who previously edited '1001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die'. At £12.99, this is a stocking-filler shoo-in. **quarto.com**



DR DELIA

Uni pays tribute to Radiophonic legend

In 2017, Coventry University awarded Delia Derbyshire a posthumous honorary doctorate, and it has since christened its new Arts and Humanities premises The Delia Derbyshire Building as a lasting tribute to the great BBC Radiophonic Workshop artist, who was born in the suburb of Coundon.

"Delia Derbyshire changed the way listeners and viewers in Britain and beyond think about sound and the sonic possibilities in the world around us," says David Butler, Delia Derbyshire Day trustee. "Delia was inspired by the soundscapes she experienced in her home city of Coventry – finding beauty in the everyday and transforming the familiar into something extraordinary, whether that was a knock on the door, a metal lampshade or her own voice." **coventry.ac.uk**

UNDER THE INFLUENCE

Having recently released 'Electronic Generations', his first album in over 10 years, veteran producer and house/techno DJ **Carl Cox** digs deep into his formative influences

INTERVIEW: DAVID POLLOCK

CRATE DIGGING

"From about seven or eight years old, I was exposed to Diana Ross, Aretha Franklin, Sam & Dave, Booker T & The MG's through my father's record collection… I was already conditioned to explore music.

"My first record store, Diamond Records, was opposite the train station in West Croydon. I became very friendly with the owner. It was £1 to get there and £1 to come back on the bus, and I had enough left to buy one or two records. I liked raw, uncut funk, so Mass Production, early Cameo, Parliament – music for late-night smoky rooms. I chose very carefully. I wanted to know that what I bought I would enjoy for the rest of my life."

AUSTRALIA

"I used to build sound systems when I was 19, 20. I wanted people to hear music at its best – to feel that bass. If I had 200 people in front of me, I was a star in Carshalton. Then, in the 1990s, the rave scene came about and it was my time. I made a record called 'I Want You (Forever)' and Paul Oakenfold signed it to Perfecto, so I found myself on 'Top Of The Pops'.

"It crossed over to the Australian radio stations, and I got the opportunity to go there and play. Can you imagine that, from Carshalton all the way to Sydney? That was a massive eye-opener, knowing where I was in my life and what I was doing. I fell in love with the place, and now I live in Melbourne."

MAYDAY, MAYDAY

"When the Berlin Wall came down, I got asked to come over from the UK and represent my music. The Mayday festival in Dortmund was the first event I'd experienced that had massive production, and the sound was the best I've ever heard. It blew my mind, and I grabbed the opportunity with both hands. People were like, 'Why's this clown playing in Germany?', then I'd play these rave, hardcore and techno records, and they'd say, 'Wow, he's great!'. Phew!

"Like a lot of the early festivals, there were primarily Germans there, but now there's a cross-pollination from all over the world. Playing in so many

ILLUSTRATION: JOEL BENJAMIN

different countries and becoming culturally aware, I can see what this scene has done. It's brought people together who would never normally stand as brothers-in-arms. It really has been a phenomenon."

BARBADOS

"My mum and dad came over to Manchester from Barbados. When people talk about Barbados, they talk about Saint James, where Tiger Woods has a house, but my family lived in a place called Blades Hill – very rustic – where my dad had a convenience store. He'd be playing music, giving out rum and banana bread. Me and my sister were born in Manchester, so it was a culture shock for us to go back. The island music is soca and calypso, and my music comes from seeing this energy.

"Before she died, I knew my mum needed to see me perform for the very first time in her motherland, so I played Club Sugar and she and her friends had a VIP area in the corner. I incorporated a bit of calypso to keep them happy, but they wanted to hear the modern music too. I looked over and I could see it in her eyes… she was so happy about what I was doing. I hope when I'm 70-odd I still have that same passion for life."

DRAG RACING

"When you talk about drag racing today, people think of RuPaul. No, this is actual drag racing, where two cars take off from the line and get to the quarter-mile as quickly as they can. I love American muscle cars – the Ford Mustang, the Chevy Impala, the Pontiac GTO. I've had them all in my collection. I used to take any piece-of-shit car I had down to Run What Ya Brung at Santa Pod Raceway in Northamptonshire. I'd blow them up and get towed home.

"I stopped drag racing for years, until I came to Australia in 2004 and a friend took me back to the strip. I've built a car which gets me down the strip in 5.9 seconds at 251mph, so I'm into professional drag racing now as well."

SANDS IBIZA

"For me, music and food is a match made in heaven. In Ibiza between 2009 and 2012, I had an opportunity to become a restaurateur and create something unique. It was a daytime beach bar where you could go with your family, wearing a bikini or a pair of shorts, hang and eat the best food, while I played music you would never hear on the island – funk, soul and jazz.

"I've always loved food, whether it be pie and mash, a good steak or Asian fusion. I enjoy food with an essence of where it came from, where you're exploring your tastebuds."

ALWAYS EVOLVING

"My musicality stems from school where I played drums in a band. I was pretty good, but no Cozy Powell. My mum got me piano lessons and I hated it – I was playing 'Swan Lake' and 'The Blue Danube' – but knowing the rules and chord structures came into my life heavily, so it was worth doing. Even back in the 1970s, most of the seven-inch cuts would fade at three minutes 20 seconds, so I would tape-splice the parts I enjoyed and turn them into six-minute records. In 1994, I took six months off, built my first studio and made my first album, 'At The End Of The Cliché'.

"In 2011, I released 'All Roads Lead To The Dancefloor' – it had a bit of acclaim, but I got disheartened by it. With the attention span of youth today, I felt, the album is done. When the pandemic hit, I had all this equipment in my studio so I thought I might as well bloody use it. I gave the results to a guy called Matt King at BMG – he got back straight away and said, 'That's the best music I've ever heard you make, I want to sign you for three albums'.

"It was a 'Wayne's World' moment. 'Sorry, what? You've signed a 60-year-old DJ on a three-album deal?' He didn't want me to change a thing. I'm now going out as a live artist, performing all my shows from these machines. It's another step into being who I am, and maybe the start of something new."

'Electronic Generations' is out now on BMG

THE SIMPSON

Ex-Wild Swans man pens memoir

In 'Revolutionary Spirit: A Post-Punk Exorcism', Paul Simpson tells his rollercoaster life story in full technicolour. If you need a catch-up, Simpson was once The Teardrop Explodes' keys player, though he left the band after just one single to work in a tearoom, before forging a more experimental sound with The Wild Swans, and later forming new wave band Care with Ian Broudie of Lightning Seeds.

Simpson played a pivotal role in Liverpool's second great musical explosion, and 'Revolutionary Spirit' recounts in captivating prose his "route to fame and artistic validation". Choice cuts include his signing to Bill Drummond's Zoo Records, sharing a flat with a 17-year-old Courtney Love, and discovering that he was revered as a musical god in the Philippines. Preorder a copy now for £14. **jawbonepress.com**

EFFECTS REVOLUTION

World's first vinyl pedal is born

For guitar-obsessed vinyl junkies who thought they had seen it all, Indiana's Romanus Records have created a genuine vinyl record that doubles up as a guitar pedal. Or, rather, two guitar pedals. Side A, we're told, is a boost, while Side B is a delay effect. Made in partnership with American company Audio Disruption Devices, the $400 effects pedal is the vessel for 'Skin Walker', the latest long-player from Indianapolis two-piece Brother O Brother. Of course, being a vinyl record, it's not likely you'll want your foot anywhere near it, so the suggestion is to keep it on the platter while plugged in. You'll also need a turntable with a vertically adjustable tone arm, as Romanus Records points out 'Skin Walker' is "the thickest record ever made,". Let them know how you get on. **romanusrecords.com**

NEEDS MUST

Freewheeling through time and space, **Kris Needs** continues his adventures in sound. This month: 'I Can't Stay Away' by **Ragtyme Featuring Byron Stingily**

Recent weeks have seen me trawling through some early Chicago house 12-inch records for raw gems that stoked America's mid-1980s electronic revolution, soon after to roger the UK senseless. My rummaging was inspired initially by writing about Nina Walsh's teenage adventures at London's earliest acid house nights for our book (which include meeting lifelong compadre Mr Andrew Weatherall under a bass bin at Shoom and a surreal Gary Glitter encounter at Future).

Records like Phuture's 'Acid Trax' and Marshall Jefferson's 'Move Your Body' will always be benchmark-cementing anthems. But as with any decent movement, there was pure gold to be found in the obscure independent releases I spent much of the last century hunting down, before the internet made it easy. These earliest house tracks from the genre's anarchic infancy now sound like alien transmissions from a future planet – drenched in DIY punk energy and uniquely melancholic beauty.

Dating from 1987, 'I Can't Stay Away' by Ragtyme Featuring Byron Stingily was one of six 12s released on the tiny Bright Star imprint run by Raymond Barney – the Chicago record store lynchpin who went on to head up the Dance Mania label.

Since colliding with it in the bins at New York's Vinyl Mania emporium (where Larry Levan's saucer-eyed crowd flocked the morning after to procure whatever monster he'd unleashed hours earlier), I've rated 'I Can't Stay Away' among the era's most deeply devastating house anthems and pivotal companion to the darker-hued wonders being fermented by Fingers Inc and Master C&J.

Future Ten City singer Byron unleashes a tour de force performance of spontaneous gospel intensity. The accompanying roll call features Marshall Jefferson, who co-wrote with Byron Stingily and produced the record, Frankie Knuckles mixing with his Powerhouse in mind, and remixes by Lil Louis and, most cataclysmically, kamikaze decks-devil Ron Hardy at his inferno-like Muzic Box.

The unfettered catharsis of house music's earliest incarnations charges this record's basic ingredients like a lightsabre up the tradesman's, as radioactive cello-like synth motif, spooky space-strings and killer drum machine eruptions spike Byron's torrential testifying.

It's impossible to imagine the mayhem these mixes ignited at their bespoke niteries. On all four, that metronomic kick alone would've destroyed the floor like a jackhammer, with Frankie's dubbed-out Power-Pella and Powerhouse versions reaching transcendent peaks before Louis adds supernatural harmonies to the incessant title chorale, and Ron focuses on the song's melodic passion minus drums.

I've just seen this miraculous tune going for only a few quid on Discogs. This has been a public service announcement.

SOUND BITES

The butchers embracing beats

System is a brand new listening bar with a difference. Situated inside Stella's, a small-herd, whole carcass butchery and cookshop in north London, it is, without a doubt, the most Stoke Newington thing to ever exist. The bar was set up by the owners of Kindred, a record shop and online radio station. Open for business on Thursday and Friday evenings, you can sip a beer, eat a gourmet kebab and listen to a DJ set all at the same time. Be sure to go and check it out – or better still, get in touch to see if you can play a slot.

systemlondon.com

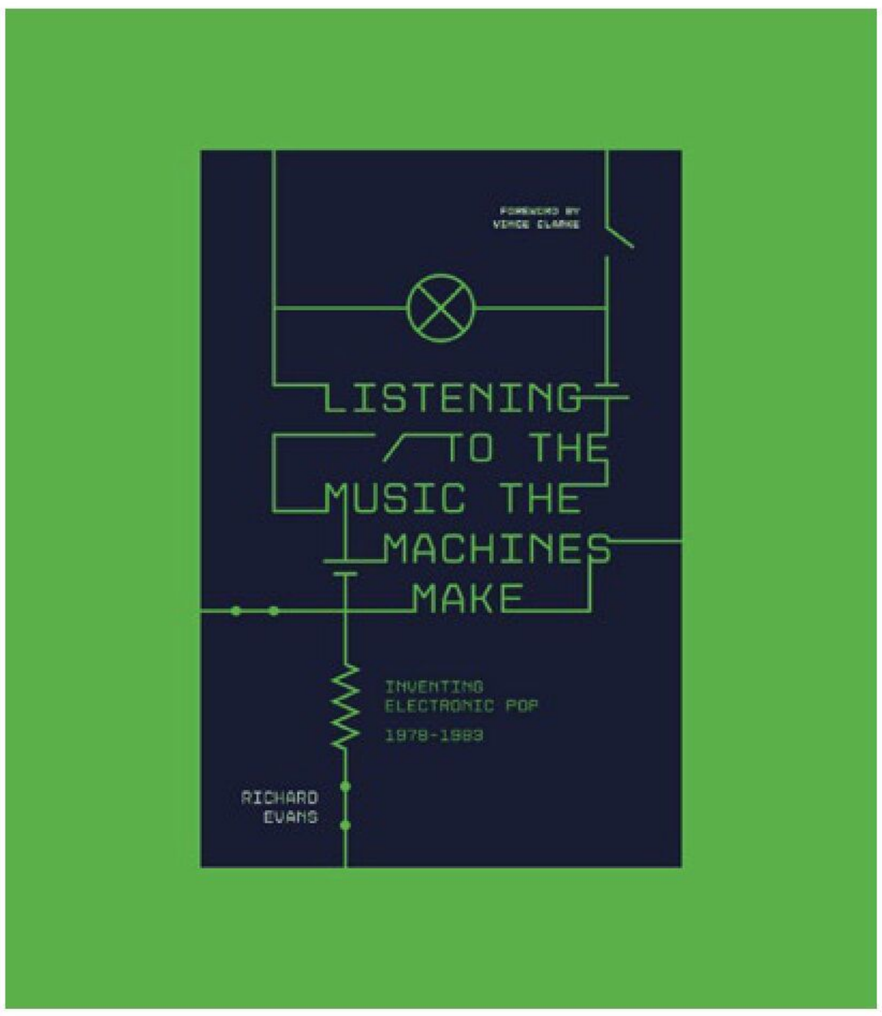
MACHINE MUSIC

Essential title charts the rise of electronics

Richard Evans' highly anticipated 'Listening To The Music The Machines Make' is published this month, and as a book which dissects "the golden age" of British music between 1977-1983, it's a must-read.

"1978 was the year of 'TVOD' and 'Being Boiled', which is where I start," says Evans. "By 1983, the new electronic pop had been completely assimilated into the mainstream, but was yet to start fragmenting into other directions and movements. I find it strange that this period and this movement isn't more celebrated – putting synthesisers into the hands of the post-punk generation and especially non-musicians was revolutionary, not only in the way music was made, but also in the way it sounded."

After 10 years in the works, Evans' book trails the era's pioneers – Depeche Mode, Gary Numan, Ultravox, the Cabs et al – dissecting the rippling effects that created the brand new form of pop music we still hear today. Featuring interviews with the likes of Martyn Ware, Daniel Miller and Vince Clarke, bag a hardback copy now for £25. **omnibuspress.com**



SCIENCE FAIR

DiN boss brings the party to Merseyside

Diaries at the ready, modular heads, because Ian Boddy is bringing his Tone Science sub-label to Liverpool. Taking place on 22 April 2023 at the Capstone Theatre, the evening event will see Scanner, Polypores, Nigel Mullaney and Field Lines Cartographer take to the stage, before a once-in-a-lifetime performance from 87-year-old American drone master, La Monte Young.

"As an encore, a live jam between all five musicians seemed a great idea," says Boddy. "But rather than a free-for-all, there will be a performance of a piece by La Monte Young." Tickets cost £20, and we recommend you book in advance. See you there. **thecapstonetheatre.com**

TIME MACHINE

Thomas Fehlmann recounts how The Orb managed a surprise return to the top of the UK charts... by way of a rejection from Jean-Michel Jarre

WORDS: JOE SILVA

Thomas Fehlmann, Swiss-born composer/producer and enduring Orb staple, joined the band in the 1990s after Jimmy Cauty's departure. Early in his lengthy tenure, he produced 'Orbus Terrarum' (1995) and, after Kris "Thrash" Weston's departure, Fehlmann worked with Alex Paterson and the late Andy Hughes on 'Orblivion' (1997), both for Island Records.

Throughout their history, The Orb have functioned much like a wiggly bit of mercury, constantly evading the thumb of the music industry as it tried to pin the band down into something it could sell.

By the end of 1995, the group had shed long-time member Thrash, and the gorgeously layered double LP 'Orbus Terrarum' resulted in a noticeable migration of their fanbase. Part of the fallout also included the loss of their Back Passage studio, which left Alex Paterson and co momentarily floating weightless in space. Where they'd dock next was Soho's Trident Studios.

"Trident became our base for a bit, even though we weren't there full-time," recalls Fehlmann. "We had quite a bit of time rented out there, and that was a big change in the sense that you had to keep focus while working. Previously, in our own studio, time was just floating by, but studios – especially in London – were still very expensive."

Trident Studios – home to legendary sessions for The Beatles, Queen and David Bowie (who earned the studio its blue plaque) – had been given a second lease of life and renamed Trident 2 in the 1980s. It was there that The Orb once again found solid footing and began working on the material that would be released on the 'Orblivion' album.

"The tracks were very much developed on the spot there with Alex, Andy and myself," says Fehlmann. "We were always pretty fast at developing

the basic ideas. Andy, who sort of replaced Kris Weston, had already been involved in 'Orbus' and in that sense the changeover was fluid."

Located a few miles from Alex Paterson's Battersea home, sessions at Trident were central enough to the London music world that all manner of pals like Steve Hillage and bassist Guy Pratt would drop in on sessions.

"It was definitely a meeting spot," remembers Fehlmann. "We had loads of friends there, and it was always good for Alex to be connected with them and with the city. Someone would be coming in and doing a bassline or suggesting a certain title for a tune or joking around. And through the joking, some new results came out of it.

"For me, with 'Orblivion', a certain element of friendship and peace reappeared in The Orb, whereas in the 'Orbus Terrarum' sessions, often there was much friction going on. There was kind of a coherent vibe within the band again – of knowing what we wanted to do, *agreeing* that we wanted to do this, and just fucking doing it."

Feeling more settled, the threesome began assembling sounds for 'Orblivion', building from samples or using whatever musical ideas came to mind – the segment of David Thewlis' semi-manic dialogue from Mike Leigh's 1993 film 'Naked', for example, acts as the basis for the track, 'SALT'.

"Basically, it was Alex jamming with himself on record decks and me picking up from there," says Fehlmann. "But Andy was very important for that album. He was a keyboard-oriented person and would play certain sequences. The final production phase would be the same as before, but the actual 'creation' moment was pretty happy and quick. We did quite a bit of work at Trident, like remixing jobs and various other bits."

One of those "bits" turned out to be a remix request from Jean-Michel Jarre. The French electronic heavyweight was marking the 20th anniversary of his landmark 'Oxygène' album with a new collection of similarly themed tracks. Jarre was hunting around for remixers to put a modern spin on the results and, at some point, The Orb got the call. But Jarre didn't much like what they did to his work, and the track was sent back, red-stamped "Non!".

"I was still living in Berlin and going back and forth, so Alex and Andy finished it, and it got rejected by Jean-Michel. Let's put it this way… when you get a remix turned down, normally that's a frustrating situation. But then we asked for permission to use it as an Orb track, and he gave us the OK."

Rechristened 'Toxygene', it was pure Orb – a juddering dancefloor filler with an undeniable hook, swathed in clever samples and psychedelic incidentals. Just to be on the safe side, the band even had their version checked out by a musicologist who gave them the requisite assurances, so they could issue the track without having to credit anyone else as writers.

And despite the album being held up for an age while Island Records busied themselves trying to turn U2 into a dance band, the single went Top Five in the UK in early 1997. Jean-Michel Jarre might not have been able to stick it at the time, but The Orb had collaged whatever he had handed back to them into a bona fide hit.

"When we got permission to use it on a track, we were slapping one another on the shoulder saying, 'This could go someplace', because it was very poppy," says Fehlmann. "So that was a really happy accident."

Thomas Fehlmann's 'Böser Herbst' album is out now on Kompakt

HIT THE WOODWORK

Side desk gives options for your studio space

Audio Housing have brought us more minimalist studio fodder to drool over with the Auxiliary 16, the Barcelona company's new side unit. Designed to add workspace to your main production desk, it offers additional space for 10 units of 19-inch rack equipment in the hollowed-out centre, plus an additional six units of rack on the front. For music makers, the most desirable feature is no doubt its versatility, with the company providing six different build blueprints, each catering to a particular use whether you're a modular hoarder or just need extra room for synths. Handmade from Baltic Birch Plywood, one unit costs €549, with shipping to the UK currently just €40. 'Nuff said.

audiohousing.com

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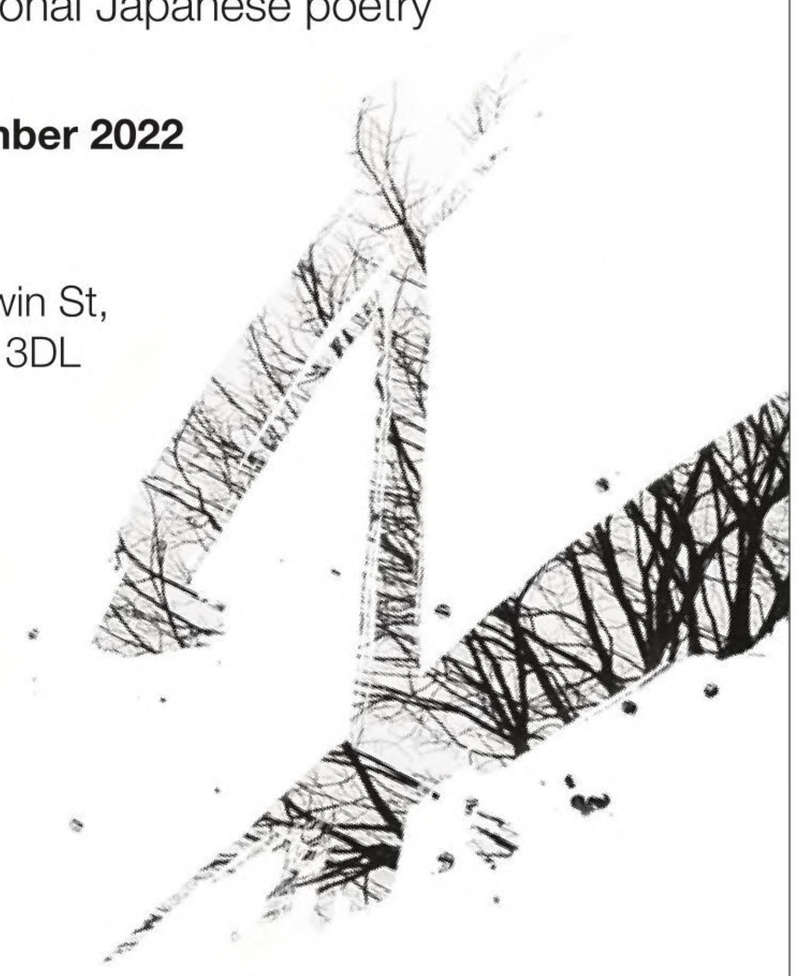


NAVIAR
RECORDS

https://www.naviarrecords.com/naviar-haiku-fest-v/

PULSE

PALE STRANGER

Prog rocker makes an electronic gem

WHO?

Pale Stranger is the electropop alias of Midlands multi-instrumentalist Paul Lynch, who recently sneaked out a self-titled debut solo album on Bandcamp. With guest vocals from Charlotte Burrows, Emma Lynch and Grace Capper bringing soul to his glistening production, 'Pale Stranger' is a genuine sonic gem waiting to be discovered.

WHY PALE STRANGER?

'Pale Stranger' came about after Lynch found himself social distancing from his other band, the jovial and nautical-themed prog group, Seas Of Mirth. This sudden separation led him to begin a personal journey, exploring the electronic music that soundtracks his daily life – long walks with Animal Collective, relaxing with Talk Talk and Björk, writing while listening to Avey Tare, dancing to 1990s big beat... and it's all distilled into his music, along with aesthetic cues from anime cyberpunk classics 'Akira' and 'Ghost In The Shell', adding a frenzy to how the album unfolds. "I wanted the music to sound busy, warped... maybe even cluttered at times, so the words are kind of fighting against the music," explains Lynch. The "pure pop" vocals might be at odds with the experimental feel, but 'Pale Stranger' never feels disjointed. Tracks like 'Woodcutter' seamlessly connect the dots between New Order and La Roux via post- punk, and all told, it's a brilliantly left-field album chock-full with melodic pop bangers.

TELL US MORE...

Though seemingly a solo project, 'Pale Stranger' is in fact a family affair. During the pandemic, Lynch moved in with his brother Stephen and sister-in-law Emma, who both ended up playing vital roles on the album. Emma's lush vocals feature on several tracks, and Stephen is responsible for the abstract cover art, featuring a low exposure photo taken over the entirety of lockdown. Go check it out now.

JAMES THORNHILL

'Pale Stranger' is out now on Bandcamp

HEAR ME OUT

Births, funerals and inspiring basketball coaches... in 'Noise In The Key Of Life', his remarkable new field recording project, Polish artist **Lukasz Polowczyk** distills five years into one remarkable album

WORDS: ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH

When an artist pitches their album as resembling "a Napalm Death Peel Session cassette tape created from a 10th-generation copy, played on a Grundig MK 235 mono boombox for the millionth time" – by golly – it's hard not to press play.

This is how Polish artist Lukasz Polowczyk describes 'Noise In The Key Of Life', his stunning new project made up of field recordings taken over the last five years. Supported by heavy synth work and spiritual sax licks, it's provocative and meditative, blurring the line between art and life.

And the story begins with Metallica.

"I am certain that my strange obsession with distorted and textured sounds started out with them," exclaims Polowczyk. "One day, I was hanging out with a bunch of kids. We were posted up behind my apartment building, and this older guy came through with a shitty mono boombox. He was playing 'Kill 'Em All' [Metallica's 1983 debut album] from this busted tape. It was just hiss and distortion, no bass. I fell in love, instantly!"

Polowczyk grew up in the Targówek projects in the northern district of Warsaw – "a typical socialist neighbourhood", where public life was fostered through the outward-facing utopian architecture. Which meant that from a young age, Polowczyk was tapping along to the offbeat rhythms of city life.

"You had diplomats living next to construction workers, teachers next to cops, cops next to gentlemen with questionable credentials, who shuttled to and from prison," he remembers. "It was a colourful and eclectic mix. For a kid, it was the best place to grow up!"

For 'Noise In The Key Of Life', however, Polowczyk turns the gaze inwards, observing his own life by using field recordings to form a sculpted sound diary. From hospital visits to his four-year-old daughter's laughter, it's an intimate listening experience – sometimes alarmingly so. The track 'Inconvenience Of Def', for example, may strike your eardrums as a scurrying howl of deformed sound, whose origin you can't quite place.

It's actually a recording taken during his godfather's funeral. Was he ever worried about the consequences of pressing record?

"If I'm not present – like not really there to experience something at a human level – then I won't record it," he says. "I wouldn't record something just for shock value. Especially knowing that someone is suffering or experiencing some sort of discomfort while I'm recording. I would rather just jump in and help them!"

But was there ever any pushback from his family when they found out?

"With the funeral, my family read the book before they heard the actual piece, so they knew that I honoured this gentleman," he says. "Again, laying everything out in essay form helped me create the right context for them to experience this work."

Ah yes, the book. Alongside the music, Polowczyk has written a deeply thoughtful 60-page companion to the project, providing a background for each track and philosophical meditations on the practice of making field recordings. Each essay comes splattered with laugh-out-loud observations about the bizarre nature of daily life. It's an enriching read.

"This might sound strange, but I see my art practice as the equivalent of cooking," says Polowczyk. "You know, when you make a meal for somebody, you want them to be 'nourished' in a variety of ways. You want them to have a great experience. You want the thing to taste great, but you also want them to feel the transmission of soul or love – that extra something that makes a meal feel great. I don't see the point in projecting violence, or using art to dump negative energy on people. The world is already fucked up as it is!"

Hear, hear! In the acknowledgements section of the book, Polowczyk cites a number of names. There are those you'd expect – John Coltrane,

Ryuichi Sakamoto, Patti Smith, John Cage – and the more intriguing, such as Dave Chapelle, Zane Lowe, Virgil Abloh… and Phil Jackson.

Wait. Surely you don't mean the ex-LA Lakers head coach, *Phil Jackson*?

"That's him," confirms Polowczyk. "I watched 'Last Dance', which is a documentary about him taking the Chicago Bulls to the championship finals a total of six times. It blew my mind that his whole methodology was based around Zen Buddhism, and music.

"He worked with the team to help them operate out of a selfless space, and also had them improvise like a jazz outfit. He literally made the team play with a beat and bars in mind, which helped the players sync up and flow together as a single unit. I read a couple of his books, and it dawned on me that being a musician is a lot like being an athlete. As an artist, with all the opposition that you face, both internal and external, you need to have a strong and focused mind to be able to push through!"

Have you ever considered moonlighting as a life coach, Lukasz?

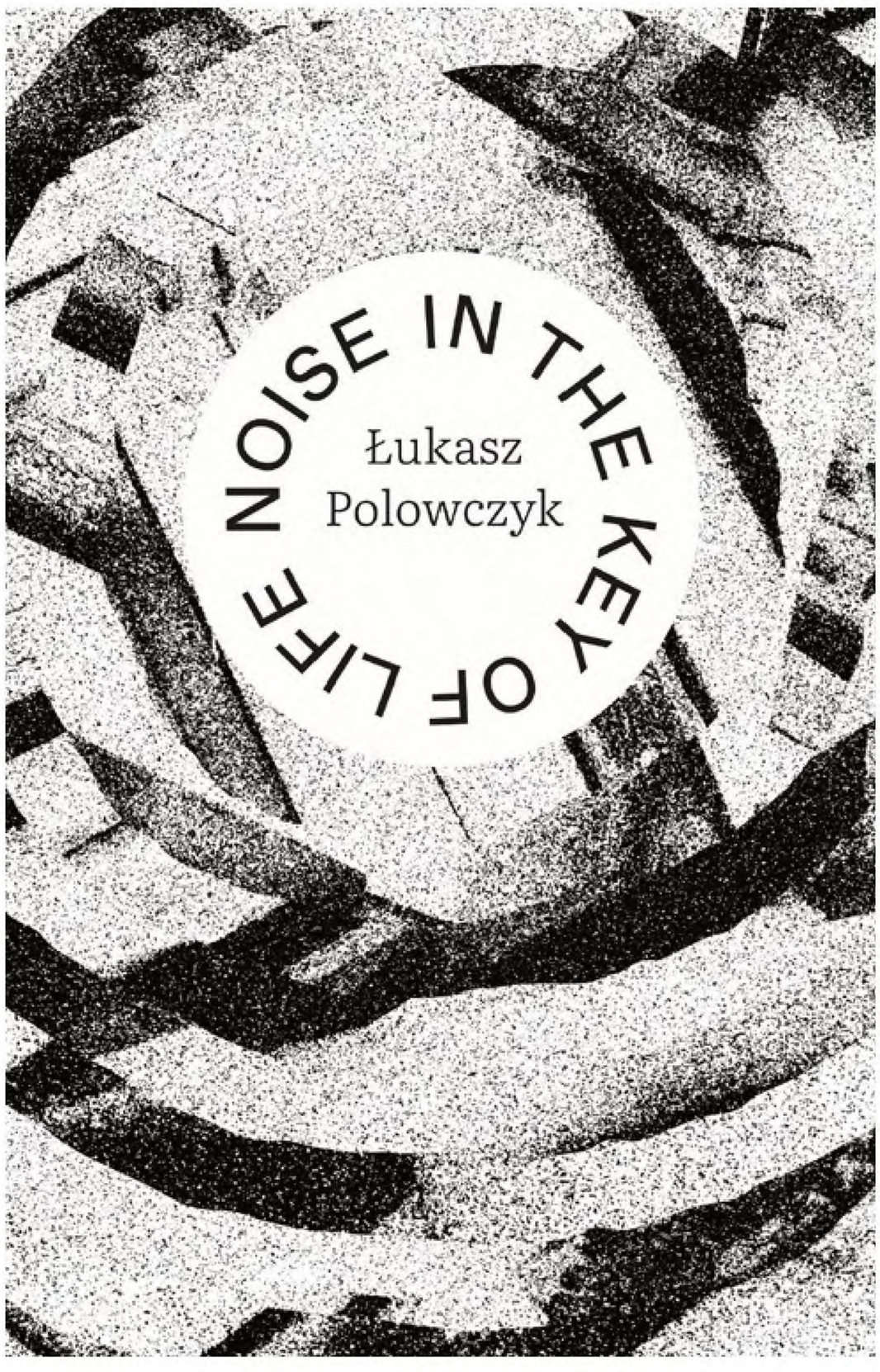
"You also have to move from your core!" he adds.

What else have you got on today?

"I'm always working on something, so there is no real downtime for me. At the moment, I'm knee-deep in two spoken word albums. The first one is the follow-up to 'Aint About Me', a project with my brother Jan Wagner.

"The second is a record with my brother Prairie. This will be more on some dystopian dreams and visions. I also have some ideas for a series of video installations which will combine spoken word with sound design and the human body in motion – I can't wait to carve out some time for this. The to-do list is hella-long!"

'Noise In The Key Of Life' is out now via Bandcamp



PULSE

DILETTANTE

Artist channels Tuneyards-y art pop

WHO?

A Leeds ex-pat marooned in Manchester, going by the fabulous name of Francesca Pidgeon. "I've just moved into a lovely flat where I can literally see Strangeways prison," she smiles, wobbling the webcam round to prove it. She seems chipper enough, but her debut album is called 'Tantrum', and it's a white-knuckle ride of gloriously tuneful 20-something angst.

WHY DILETTANTE?

"People always said I would be someone / Platitudes make good lullabies," she sings on lead single 'Big Fish', perfectly encapsulating that killer moment when the childhood bubble is finally popped by grotty adult concerns. 'Teeth', meanwhile, is a jazzy, brassy paean to modern anxiety. "Someone said to me that if you're anxious, you clench your teeth a lot," she explains. "And now I do it all the time! Sorry if I've made you do it as well… I play keys, sax, clarinet, guitar, loop pedal, sometimes even drums. And the name is me admitting I'm not very good at any of them!" she laughs. It's pish. She's a consummate multi-instrumentalist, making brilliantly extravagant art-pop soap operas. Take the song 'Surrogate Lover', which is like Kate Bush singing Victoria Wood. On Broadway. "I stayed too long at his staff Christmas party / Then told him my life story, drunk on Bacardi…". To ask a question that's probably been posed before, Francesca – is this real life? Or is it just fantasy? "It's all real stuff, I have no imagination," she admits. "Being too honest is what I *like* about writing songs."

TELL US MORE...

She tours with open-hearted US indie star BC Camplight, has supported Self Esteem and cites Tune-Yards as a major influence. "I didn't realise what you could do with a loop pedal until I saw them live in about 2012," she explains. "Most of my album was written with one. Tune-Yards, Fiona Apple and St Vincent are my three guys. My holy trinity…".

BOB FISCHER

Dilettante's' debut album, 'Tantrum', is out now

BOUND TO THE STEEL

Sheffield's **No Bounds Festival** is a riotous weekender of electronic mayhem, and as our man on the ground cautions, "people with pacemakers are advised against attending"

WORDS: FAT ROLAND

Be honest. If you were curating an electronic music festival in Sheffield, you'd hark back to Cabaret Voltaire, The Human League and Warp Records. Staples of the Steel City. Not so for the sixth iteration of No Bounds Festival, which reached much further back into history – to spectacular effect – as the opening and closing nights for 2022's event were held in Sheffield Cathedral. Out with the 80s eyeliner, in with the sackcloth and ashes.

With parts of the church dating back 1,000 years, this was a risk. These pious palaces were designed not to need any sound system, and with amped-up bass troubling the gargoyles, cathedral gigs can be notoriously muddy.

Thankfully, the church is well-adjusted to a modern world. Historic stone pillars surround a less-than-historic gift shop, and 14th century stained glass contrasts with laminated ads for ice cream as diligent cathedral volunteers womble up people's discarded drinks. Choosing this venue for its pivotal commissioned works brought heart to this music and technology festival.

Opening proceedings is "e-Textiles" artist Mika Satomi with an interdisciplinary choreographic performance called 'Patterns In Between Intelligences'. Pairs of fake eyelashes mark her cheeks like glam warpaint, and her black-suited dancers, led by Berlin's Deva Schubert, look like a police SWAT team. The pitter-patter of their movement grows into a hailstorm, dancers gape like goldfish and a helicopter drone goes walkies like a fantastic sky dog. Silk textiles with Dalí-esque illustrations become a swirling materialistic muse before finally a thunderous techno onslaught sees dancers slump defeated against the church's grand pillars. During it all, quietly underappreciated, live coders input data into the maelstrom. Quite the appetiser.

Also on opening night, gamer visuals of knights and aliens accompany the heavily funnelled rave of Blawan – Monty Python meets 'Doom'. Konx-Om-Pax is playing in place of a visa-struck Deena Abdelwahed, matching his liquid techno with watery, saturated visuals. Only the Salfordian onslaught of Tom Heyes, aka experimental rapper Blackhaine, met – and exceeded – Satomi's darkest moments. In oppressive blue light, Heyes wrestles eviscerating squeals from a guitar while careening into the audience to deliver his feverish sermons.

By contrast, the closing concert in the cathedral is a more whispery affair. Snd's Mark Fell presents 'Zero As A Limit', an acoustic evening led by the lauded chamber group Explore Ensemble. Commissioned pieces from thrilling producer Beatrice Dillon sees woodwinds and dampened piano tones used as pistons. Morton Feldman's 'Crippled Symmetry' is a soporific affair despite its gentle discordance, while the highlight is Indian artist Nakul Krishnamurthy's playful call-and-response piece, as vocal harmonies tease musicians into a delightful animalistic courtship. Thousands of paper doves suspended from the cathedral ceiling come into their own here – the dangling birds, installed by sculptor Peter Walker a month previously, sway gently as if riding minuscule soundwaves.

Away from the spiritual splendour and classical commissions of the cathedral, the atmosphere is much more carnal. The beating heart of No Bounds can be found in the all-night raves held at Hope Works, Sheffield's famed artsy space that once farmed First World War artillery. These industrial estate entertainments could not provide a wilder contrast, with five closely knit clubhouses pumping out dance music until 6am.

A DJ-led line-up, bass frequencies rise through the air and carry on the moonlit smoke from nearby chimneys. Maybe it's my sleep deprivation that makes it seem so romantic, but you can hear the manic bubble-pop effects of algoravers tapping furiously at their laptops, 96 Back cutting a breezily cheerful four-to-the-floor mood, The Black Dog punching your cobwebs to the other side of the Pennines, or Spinee's unrelenting bangers making the Portaloos vibrate with worrying uniformity.

Self-proclaimed "vinyl archaeologist" Palms Trax drops Drum Club's 'Sound System', which makes one particularly crusty old Electronic Sound journo very happy. Calibre and LTJ Bukem have more bass drops than a clumsy fisherman, the low frequencies turning the sofas at the back of the venue into aggressive massage chairs. Meanwhile, DJ Scratchclart was so engrossed in his precision mixing – fascinating to watch – he didn't even take his backpack off.

A personal highlight? Watching Bristol producer Grove build a scattered crowd of about 20 people into a roof-toppling block party.

"We love being gay and we love dancehall music," they declare to rapturous cheers. Bringing the raving to an end is the ever-reliable Working Men's Club, followed by Yoda-wise track selections by local junglist Charla Green.

Green is just one of an impressive number of Sheffield artists at the festival, and along with those already mentioned (The Black Dog, 96 Back), there's also Rian Treanor, rapper Sarinity Jones and breakbeat champion Tim Reaper, who is so popular in the small hours of Saturday morning, the audience is spilling out of the doors.

As well as using the cathedral, No Bounds scores a striking architectural coup by using the bold and brutalist Moore Street electricity substation. Jog up 14 flights of stairs and you'll find Mythical Living Data, French artist Noémie Soula's polluted environment study, where alien biological projections are accompanied by sinister sonic modifications of the building's electrical hum.

I'm not sure if it's the numerous stairs, the quiet shock of the artworks ("Is that a lung?") or the constant frisson of electricity, but people with pacemakers are advised against attending. Other arty explorations include David Cotterell's algorithmic dome patterns accompanied by equally generative noises by Shelly Knotts, and melting icecaps expressed as a room slowly filling with oil thanks to Lise Autogena and Joshua Portway. Ah, some proper culture in between the disco naps.

PHOTO: FRANKIE CASILLO

No Bounds Festival arrives just a week after the technological gear show SynthFest.

"You can't get big-headed in this place," says No Bounds curator Liam O'Shea about the city.

Sheffield is certainly ahead of the game among northern locations in embracing its cultural history without getting hooked on the temptation for needless nostalgia. With years of electricity generation arising as droning demons in the substation, or the cathedral acting as the ultimate gothic reverb chamber, there is a lot of harking to the past. But it isn't the past we expected, and No Bounds was all the stronger for it. Its brightest energy was not in the steely synths of yesteryear, but in the rising stars behind the decks.

PULSE

MÖRMAID

Heavenly electronica from Scandi siren

WHO?

Norwegian vocalist and producer Live Sollid Schulerud stealthily emerged from the Oslo underground scene during the last decade. Her CV includes a stint with the experimental vocal choir Oslo 14 Vokalensemble, and she tutors musicians in the ways of Ableton in her spare time – though none of this will prepare you for the fully realised, invigorating manifestation that is Mörmaid. Her extraordinary, ethereal, dreampop single, 'Turn Away', was released in 2020, which more than whetted appetites. Two years later, her debut EP, 'Push Pull', confirms the first taster was no apparition.

WHY MÖRMAID?

Live Sollid Schulerud is a fine name, though Mörmaid suggests an artist who'll entice you into the water, make you smash your head against some rocks and then have you do it all over again. 'Push Pull' certainly lives up to that metaphorical, postulated sequence of events, with enough sonic diversity to signal an artist who is confident to fish in several directions at once. Lead single, 'We Love We Dive', does that to a tee – a dreampop fantasy with angelic vocal ostinatos, which then breaks down into weird, glitchy codas carried along by a skittering underbelly of beats.

TELL US MORE...

Schulerud, who now resides in London, will inevitably garner comparisons to artists like Björk, Holly Herndon, Jenny Hval and Arca, to name just a few. But there's more than enough invention on 'Push Pull' to convince you that Mörmaid is a genuine one-off. Anna Prior of Metronomy certainly thinks so, with Schulerud a marquee signing to her Beat Palace label. It'll be interesting to sit back and watch how the internal fight between heightened pop sensibilities ('Mirror', 'You To Me') and stern, nocturnal bangers ('Punish') plays out. Dive in.

JEREMY ALLEN

'Push Pull' is released on 18 November by Beat Palace

NEW RADICAL

Synth with attitude from Czech developer

From maverick makers Bastl Instruments comes the ironically named Softpop SP2, a semi-modular instrument full of sonic rage. This "radical subtractive synth", as Bastl call it, is "a rare beast that excels at both melody and noise in equal measure". Inspired by the late Rob Hordijk's classic Banjolin synth, with a so-called analogue heart and digital brain, the SP2 features an onboard sequencer, external audio processing, multimode filter and a generously sized patch bay for creative signal routing. Sate your curiosity for £530. **bastl-instruments.com**

SEE THE LIGHT

DJ Food releases book about projections

Any fans of Trunk Records and niche cultural movements in the house? Then grab your notepad and pen. 'Wheels Of Light: Designs For British Light Shows 1970-1990' is a lovely new tome put together by Kevin "Strictly Kev" Foakes (aka DJ Food), which pays tribute to the key projection companies of the late 20th century. The likes of Optikinetics, Pluto and Orion feature prominently, showcasing their imaginative images – swirling and rotating projections of abstract psychedelia and kaleidoscopic visions of outer space – which provided the mind-blowing backdrops to many important gigs and raves of the era. Published by the venerable Four Corners Books, you can order a copy of 'Wheels Of Light' for £14. We strongly advise you do. **fourcornersbooks.co.uk**

LANDMARKS

Sweet Exorcist's **Richard Barratt** – aka DJ Parrot/ Crooked Man – recalls the making of 1990's essential bleep techno cut, 'Testone', with Richard H Kirk

INTERVIEW: ROBERT HARRIS

"Both Richard H Kirk and Stephen Mallinder came to Jive Turkey, the club night I ran in Sheffield, right from the off in 1985. They were always super-supportive of anybody doing interesting stuff in Sheffield. The idea of working together came up simply through being out and about, and socialising. Prior to Sweet Exorcist, Richard and I had made a track under the name Wicky Wacky – something that started with Rich banging out house chords on the piano. We put some light girly voices on it, then darkened things back down with the break from Dynamic Corvettes' 'Funky Music Is The Thing' and the Cabs' 303.

"Me and Richard had both somehow ended up under contract to major record labels and were desperate to do something different. The sessions for 'Testone' began speculatively. Western Works, with its beautiful staircase and large warning poster of Sir Nose, had by this point fallen victim to the town planners, and the Cabs had built a new studio, Universal Works, down the road in another ex-industrial space.

"I didn't have any kit of my own, but the track was created specifically for Warp, and thankfully they paid the tab when they picked the track up. For some reason, Warp had a problem with the spelling 'Testtone' and lost a 't'. Decades later, I'm still getting folk violently insisting that the record's called 'Test One'.

"Working with Richard, there was always an element of experimentation – turning stuff upside-down and giving it a good shake to see what might happen. The idea of using the test tones for lining up tape machines was there, I had the little vocal sample, the title of the track and the name of the act. What I didn't have was the tricky musical stuff. That's where Kirky came in.

"I wanted to connect the dots between the kind of music our friends were making and other earlier forms of Sheffield electronics. In my head, there was a direct line between the birth of Cabaret Voltaire in 1973 and the formation of Warp Records in 1989. There was a lot of chatting and discussion of ideas, quite mellow in general – at least when the equipment wasn't fighting back.

"The computer we were using to sequence – an Atari, running Creator – was on its first outing, and neither of us was particularly technical. There was a lot of profanity. Not quite industrial music, but certainly industrial language. Robert Gordon [Warp co-founder/producer] was eventually called in.

"Richard was a natural musician. Although untrained, he could get the semblance of a tune out of just about anything that was put in front of him. Conversely, I'm a natural non-musician. If 'Testone' has a unique sound, that would be down to the idiosyncratic nature of the people rather than the machinery or any special techniques.

"We used an E-MU Emax to sample the vocals, test tones and 808 hat, which we then reversed. The Emax also provided the choral vocals. And we had a Roland Juno-60, an SH-09 and an 808, all mixed down onto a Soundcraft two-inch through a 24-track, eight-bus Soundcraft desk. Then, because we couldn't make the Atari do what we wanted it to do, we put sections onto quarter-inch tape via a Revox B77 and edited them together, 'olde-worlde'-style. I had to get in touch with Mal to remind me what the desk/tape hardware was, which he kindly did.

"Mal also told me the interesting fact that all the Soundcraft tackle came from Blackwing Studios in London and had previously been used on massive records by the likes of Depeche Mode and Yazoo. I think the main bleep might have been the Juno-60. The more melodic bleeps that appear later in the track are the sampled test tones.

"Although they were planned to be the musical crux of the tune, when translated into real life the test tones didn't feel substantial enough, and the Roland bleep was allowed to take over. The voices were a preset in the Emax. Forgemasters and Unique 3 both had synth vocals on their records, so we thought we'd better have some on ours!

"I've heard people say over the years that we nicked this or pilfered that, but honestly, the spoken intro is the only part not performed in the studio. To my mind, the key dance element and real rhythmic driving force of 'Testone' is the 808 percussion part. That's what glues the track together, while simultaneously pushing it forward. Kirky did that, not me!

"This all happened at some point in 1989, but the finished track took fucking ages. Thankfully, the first time I played it at Jive Turkey, it went down really well. It got played twice that first night, the second time as the last tune of the evening, after which it received whistles and a good smattering of applause. Warp spun that into a vision of the dancefloor erupting into a spontaneous roar of appreciation. What I remember most is that one side of the choral voices disappeared in the dropdown, which me and Kirky had totally missed when we were editing the quarter-inch. So we had to put that section down again and then fit it back in – duh!

"It's rather surprising to be talking about 'Testone' 30-odd years later. Dance music has always been a very trend-driven form, and if a tune or style becomes popular there'll always be a flood of soundalikes quickly chasing it up.

"The ideal way to get a floor-moving hit is to make a track that's samey enough not to scare DJs or timid dancers, but different enough to have its own personality. With people like me and Kirky, there's always the danger that a piece will be weighed down with a little too much personality to ever get carried out of the record shop.

"Happily, 'Testone' was something that pulled off the tricky balancing act of being the same, but different. It wasn't by any means the first bleep record, but it had enough of its own identity to stand out and to give the genre a name… and I must say that 'bleep' slips off the tongue with rather more elan than fucking 'Yorkshire techno'."

Richard Barratt's Athletes Of God project have a new single, 'Don't Wanna Be Normal', out now on Foundation Music

BOOTLEG BONANZA

Cut your own records

Yuri Suzuki has joined forces with Teenage Engineering to make the PO-80 Record Factory – a cute and compact portable vinyl cutter that lets you play back your results straight away. The £149 starter pack comes with the PO-80 itself (a device resembling a toy turntable), a chunky cutting needle, and a pack of five-inch blank records. Simply plug the machine into an audio source and get recording. Or if you happen to own one of TE's Pocket Operator synths, you can even make your own music and get vinyl production moving immediately. How many label heads can offer that these days, eh? **teenage.engineering**

WINDOWS LICKER

Free software made by Aphex Twin

Samplebrain is a new software instrument from Aphex Twin and Dave Griffiths of UK social justice nonprofit, Then Try This. Allegedly 20 years in the making, the open-source sample masher is said to be inspired by the music recognition algorithms of Shazam – something Richard D James considers a "genius idea". Available to download for free from Gitlab, it works by chopping and changing local audio into grains, before matching different grains to one another to reinterpret the sounds. Also notable is Samplebrain's sleek and professional font choice – Comic Sans – typical of AT's wry iconoclasm.

"I still think Shazam could be repurposed for something incredible," says James. "But in the meantime we have Samplebrain." **gitlab.com**

REMA TEAM

Post-punk cult heroes hit the big screen

What links Siouxsie And The Banshees, Adam And The Ants, The Wolfgang Press, Renegade Soundwave and Psychic TV? The answer, of course, is Rema-Rema, the cult English post-punk band who were signed to 4AD and disbanded before the release of their 1980 debut EP, 'Wheel In The Roses'. Now, the story of this almost mythical group is the subject of a compelling documentary, 'What You Could Not Visualise', directed by Marco Porsia, who calls Rema-Rema a "band's band".

"There's a lot of connective tissue in their story," he says. "David Bowie, Cabaret Voltaire, Siouxsie and Throbbing Gristle are all part of the Rema-Rema story." Porsia has managed to secure interviews with the likes of 4AD head honcho Ivo Watts-Russell, JG Thirlwell, Stephen Mallinder and Steve Albini, as well as the members of Rema-Rema themselves. Keep an eye out for screenings near you. **docnrollfestival.com**

DELUXE LIFE

Luxury jubilee headphones from Japan

Portable audio has never looked so good, as Audio-Technica commemorate their 60th birthday with these luxurious ATH-W2022 wooden cans. Blending exquisite artistry and craftsmanship with cutting-edge sound, the ATH-W2022's housings are crafted from Japanese Mizume birch, and finished with traditional urushi lacquer. Whatever that means, it looks great, and they're finished with hand-painted sakura and phoenix designs on the left and right housings respectively. Deerskin (of course) is the material of choice for the earpads and headband, but you can probably guess what's coming next… they're currently priced at a cool £8,900. Stocking filler? Maybe not. **audio-technica.com**

DARK MATTER

Personal diaries of Coil mainstays released

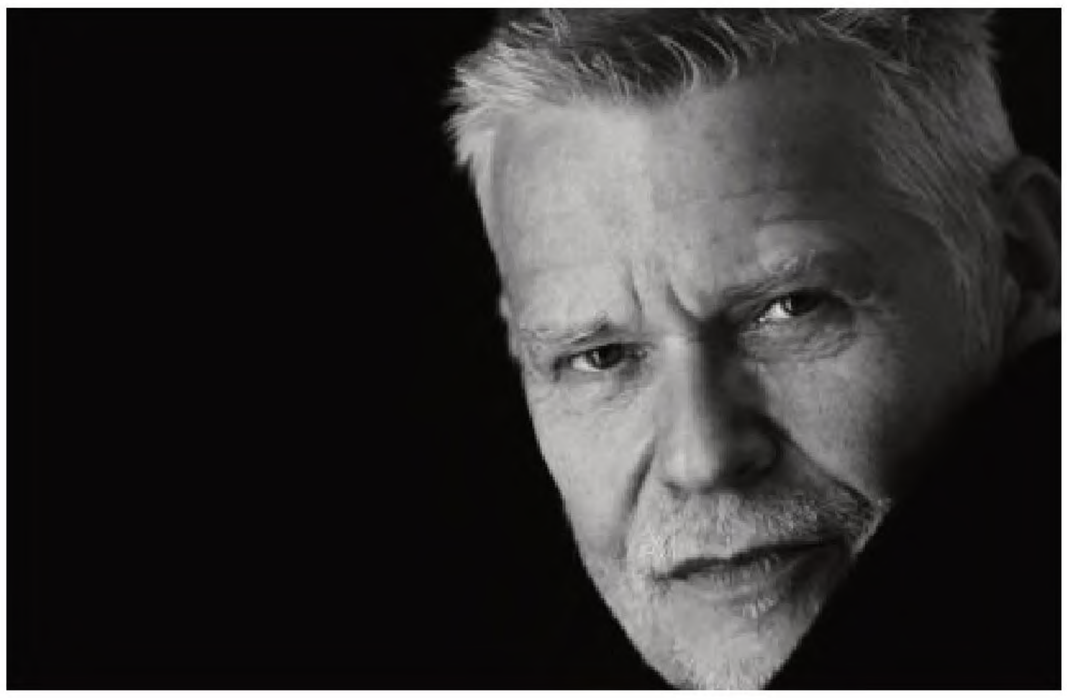
In 'Everything Keeps Dissolving', author and editor Nick Soulsby compiles a selection of interviews with Coil's Peter "Sleazy" Christopherson and his partner John Balance, which relay their thrilling story in all its esoteric and acerbic glory.

Told in the present tense, this lovingly assembled chronicle touches on the duo's key ideas, intrigues and visions, providing a magick window into their shared fascination with religious and sexual symbolism. Also included are previously unseen drawings and photographs, and by the end, you'll understand exactly why Coil are so revered (and feared).

The 576-page book is published next month by Strange Attractor, who call it "a worm's eye view of Coil" – straight from the horse's mouth. It's available to preorder in paperback (£25), or there's a hardback edition (£45), which comes with an exclusive art postcard featuring an image of Balance. **strangeattractor.co.uk**

ENIGMAS

Sweeping the forgotten corridors of sound, this month **Scott Blixen** sets his sights on **Achim Reichel**



For over 40 years, Achim Reichel's kosmische music was known only to a select few. Even Julian Cope's 'Krautrocksampler' failed to recognise it. Yet between 1971 and 1975, Reichel released six LPs which, by right, should seat him among the finest German experimentalists.

Despite this, when music with only a whiff of kosmische flavouring was being exhumed, Reichel's best work remained buried, seemingly at the behest of its creator.

"I have a multiple identity – in my home country I'm a singer/songwriter, and in the rest of the world I'm just a veteran krautrocker," he told me.

As these albums represent a creative peak that went largely ignored, it's perhaps understandable he's protective of them.

After a spell in 1960s beat combo The Rattles, Reichel began exploring the psychedelic subterrain with his group Wonderland. The project that followed stemmed from communion with an Akai X-330D tape machine (with sound-on-sound recording). From there, the loop-driven music of A R & Machines was born.

"It was an accidental discovery that actually blew my mind," he says, warming to the memory.

The first fruit was 'Die Grüne Reise' (1971), an album where boogie rock riffage skews into heady cross-currents, as each lick repeats and decays. To describe it as Status Quo remixed by Steve Reich could be off-putting, but somehow Reichel transformed base metal into gold.

While the debut whets your appetite, 1972's 'Echo' is the magnum opus. This double LP is COLOSSAL in every conceivable way.

"It was my aim to create a parallel universe… where the acoustic perception of time satisfies different rules," he says cautiously, when quizzed about the concept.

This isn't hyperbole – 'Echo' induces altered states. Unlike many cosmic LPs, transcendence here isn't achieved by weightless drift. Like Neu!'s work, its momentum never ceases. Perpetually cresting waves of sound phase-shift the discombobulated listener into another dimension. The Human League's 'The Black Hit Of Space' is about a record that stops time and consumes everything. More than any I know, 'Echo' is that record.

Before returning to the mainstream with an album of sea shanties, no less, Reichel released four more loopy LPs and even made an out-there poetry album. Perhaps, because they were not well-received at the time, his joyful creations soured into painful memories.

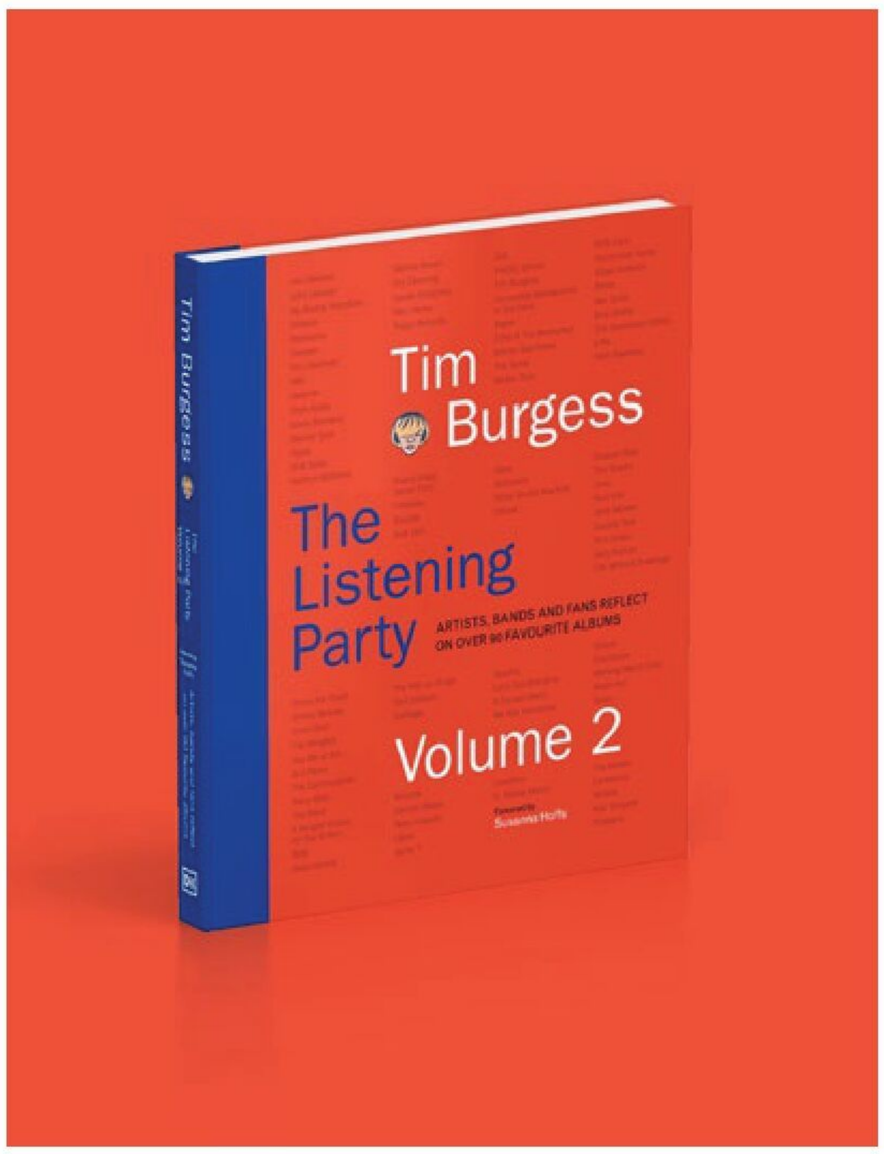
"I'd waited five years for A R & Machines to find recognition…" adds Reichel, ruefully.

For £100, you can treat yourself to 'The Art Of German Psychedelic', the 10-CD boxset he finally unleashed in 2017, with all the albums and more. As this music will change you forever, it's a paltry sum. **achimreichel.de**

MOP IT UP

‘The Listening Party’ Vol 2 arrives

Tim’s Twitter Listening Party is the online music gathering where listeners gather around a chosen record and enjoy live-tweets about it from the artist. Conceived by The Charlatans’ Tim Burgess during lockdown, it was certainly an unexpected gem that helped keep us going. It has since seen the publication of a companion book series, ‘The Listening Party’, which now gets a second volume. Featuring an additional 90 albums’ worth of reflections and insights from fans and artists alike, it includes music from Japan, Orbital, 808 State, Gwenno, Jane Weaver and many more. Reading as a love letter to the album format, it seems Paul McCartney put it best: “Let’s all say a big thanks to Tim for these brilliant events this year! We really needed them.” Published by Penguin, they’re £25 a pop. **timstwitterlisteningparty.com**



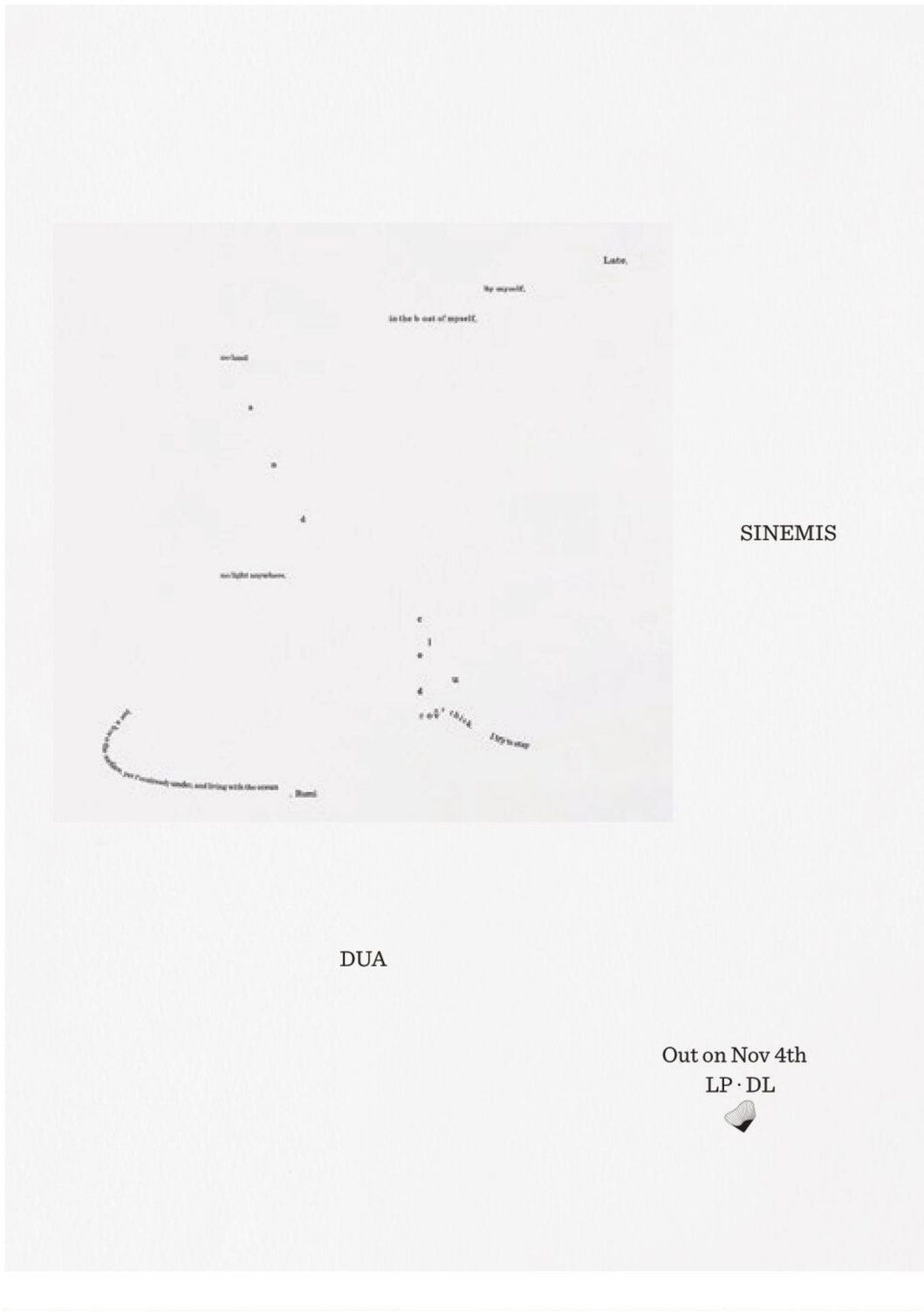
XEN STATE OF MIND

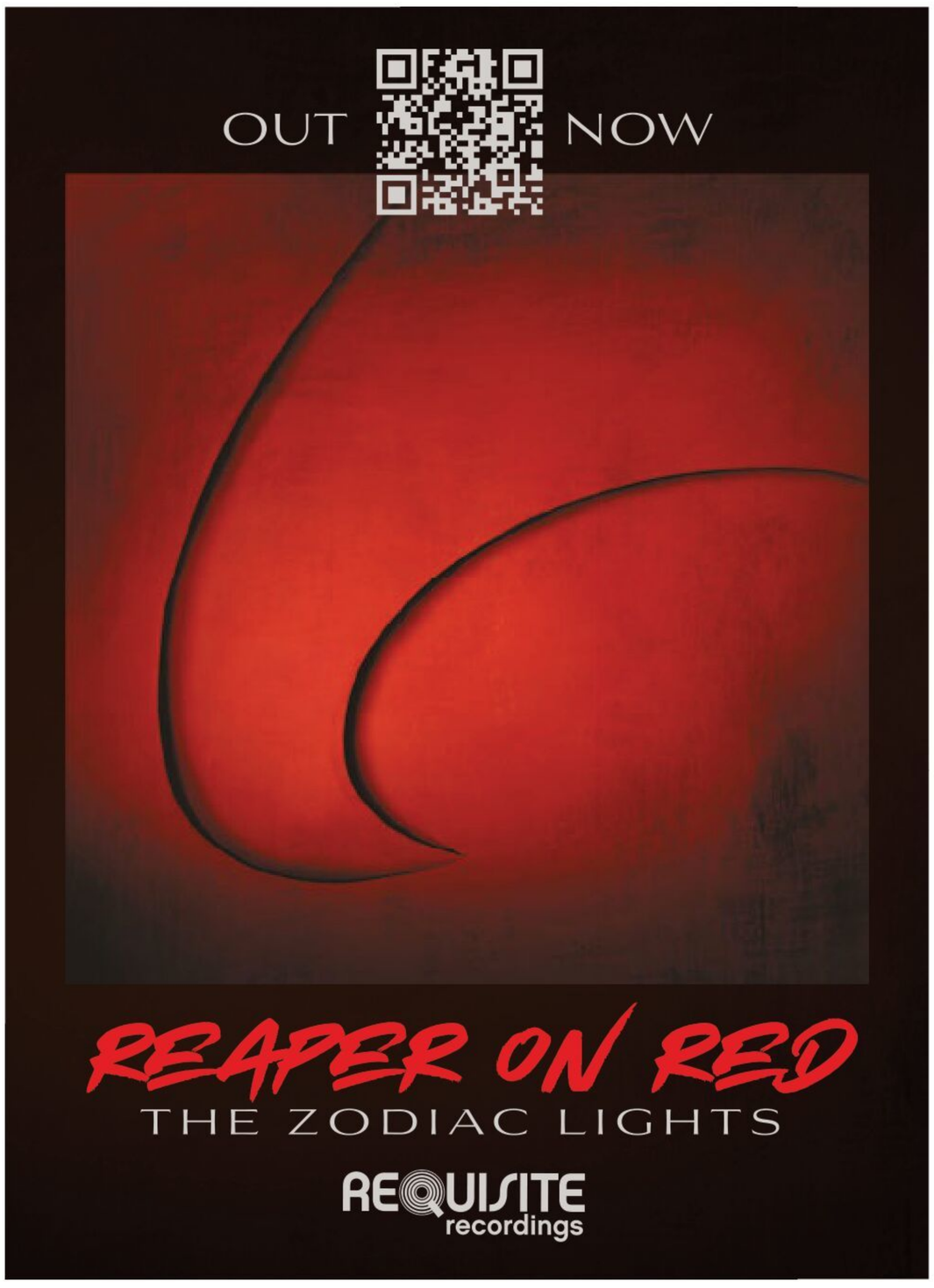
Festival celebrates all things Xenakis

If you love Iannis Xenakis and can find your way to the German capital between 18 and 20 November, we recommend you visit the Kraftwerk venue, where Berlin Atonal will be hosting ‘X100’, a festival dedicated to the electronic pioneer who died in 1997.

Featuring the likes of Moritz Von Oswald, Pan Daijing, Bill Kouligas, Lee Gamble and Valentina Magaletti among many others, artists will be invited to share works inspired by the Romanian-born, Greek-French music theorist, whose compositional techniques continue to influence artists to this day. UPIC, for example, a computerised musical composition tool which Xenakis developed in 1977, was famously the preferred weapon of choice for one Richard D James.

“It’s under 1MB, and it shits on everyone,” James told Future Music in 2006. Day tickets start from £20. **berlin-atonal.com**





PULSE

DEATH HAGS

Mysterio gives lush dreampop and more

WHO?

Bouncing between Los Angeles and a wooded spot north of New York City, the mysterious Lola G (aka Death Hags) has quietly been releasing psyched electronic music to a devoted clutch of Bandcamp followers over the past few years. Death Hags is a solo endeavour, but she finds that people sometimes mistake her for a band. "I do sometimes tour with the band," she says. "I guess that's confusing, so I'm starting to use my name more. I'm like, 'It's just me!'."

WHY DEATH HAGS?

Born in the Swiss Alps, Lola played piano as a child, long before she decided that her love for music might be put to tape. "It's not like I dreamed of being a musician when I was little," she explains. "It just sort of happened. A friend gave me a copy of ABSYNTH [Native Instruments plugin]. I thought it was amazing and spent hours making ambient noise pieces." Her recorded output straddles moments of shoegazey alt-rock ('Spiral') and straight-up synthpop ('Looking For A Big Grey Sun') that is somewhat reminiscent of Broadcast. Lola is currently in the middle of releasing a mammoth seven-album series called 'Big Grey Sun', which she began after being attacked by a… terrier. "I had a fever and was hallucinating for three days," she remembers. "But during those three days, I just wrote some instrumentals around ideas of space travel and different things."

TELL US MORE…

Still without a label, Lola makes her tracks available digitally, on CD/cassette, and periodically via extremely limited-edition handmade lathe-cut seven-inch records. "At the start of the pandemic, I was researching this guy who does vinyl postcards, but it looked a little iffy. I did three lathe-cut releases. They're not flexi discs, but I guess you could say they're lo-fi vinyl."

JOE SILVA

'Big Grey Sun #4' is out now via Bandcamp

SOS

The British Library's Save Our Sounds project aims to save UK recordings from extinction. **Andy Linehan**, curator of Popular Music, digs through some of the archive's priceless audio treasures. This month: **Unlocking Our Sound Heritage**

In July 2017, supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the British Library launched the Unlocking Our Sound Heritage (UOSH) project, with the aim of identifying, preserving and making available sound recordings held in various archives and institutions around the UK.

The British Library holds the national collection of sound recordings, and staff working in the Sound Archive had become acutely aware that many of them were under threat, both from physical decomposition and because the means of playing them were falling out of production.

Regional hubs were therefore established around the country to identify collections of interest, and engineers were trained to operate and transfer recordings from old formats. Old tape machines, MiniDisc and Digital Audio Tape players were acquired, renovated and distributed to these centres. Once digitised, they were passed to teams of cataloguers, including music and wildlife sounds specialists.

UOSH put together information packs for general distribution, which provided information on identifying different formats and how to care for them. There were also guides on how to digitise recordings and correctly store digital files to ensure their long-term preservation.

One of the priorities of the project was to make the rescued audio accessible, so a team of rights clearance experts was formed with the daunting task of tracking down people, broadcasters, publishers and organisations that had an interest in the recordings, and gaining permission to make them available on a new dedicated website or through the British Library reading rooms.

Themed learning programmes were created to promote the use of audio as an educational resource, and a series of podcasts titled 'All About Sound', hosted by poets Lemn Sissay and Kae Tempest, and novelist Monica Ali, among others, drew on the collection to show how sound and language have shaped the world.

UOSH has so far fully preserved more than 350,000 at-risk recordings and cleared more than 96,000 for online access, with around 185,000 more available at the British Library. The project closed at the end of September, but the work of preserving recordings at the British Library continues on through the Save Our Sounds programme.

For more about Save Our Sounds visit bl.uk/save-our-sounds

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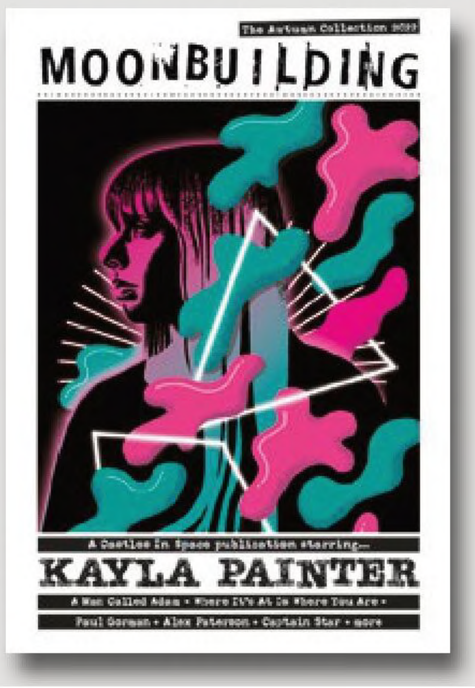

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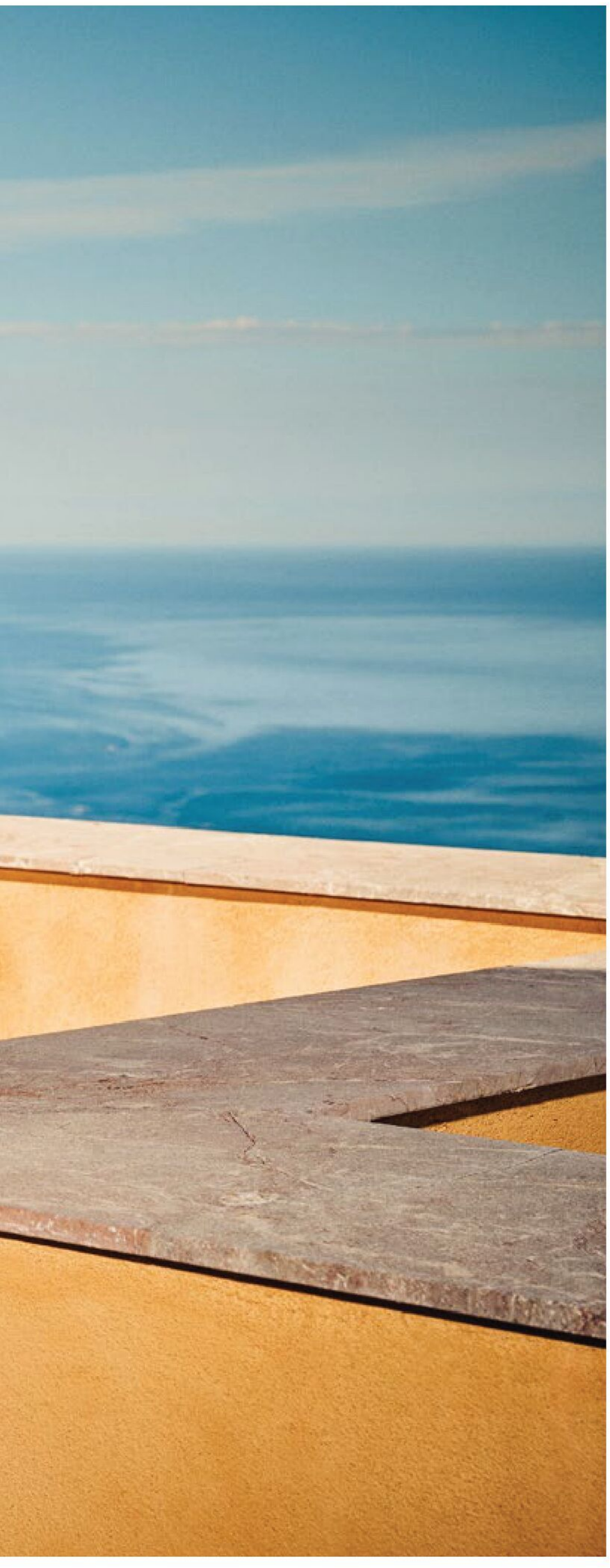


Simple Minds have just put out a new album... and it's their best since the band's heyday in the 1980s. From the striking cover to the upbeat tunes and sometimes dark lyrics, Jim Kerr and Charlie Burchill explain how 'Direction Of The Heart' came together, as well as reflecting on their enduring friendship and the 40th anniversary of their 1982 classic, 'New Gold Dream'

WORDS: PUSH
PICTURES: DEAN CHALKLEY

Jim Kerr's place is something else. Perched high on a hill on the east coast of Sicily, the deep blue of the Ionian Sea stretches beyond the horizon to the left and there's a breathtaking view of the snow-capped Mount Etna, one of the largest and most active volcanoes in the world, straight ahead. The building is made of Sicilian stone and the decor is understated luxury, with paintings by local artists dotted about. As well as a sunny swimming pool, there are terraces and walkways and no less than 27 bedrooms.

Yes, you read that right. Twenty. Seven. Bedrooms. I mean, that's virtually a hotel, right?

As it happens, Jim Kerr's place *is* a hotel. The Simple Minds frontman built Villa Angela from scratch a couple of decades ago, since when it's become a prime destination for those seeking a four-star Italian boutique experience. He doesn't live here himself, though. He has an apartment down the slope in nearby Taormina, an ancient town with a history dating back almost 3,000 years. Charlie Burchill, his long-time partner in Simple Minds, also lives in Taormina. A pebble's throw from Kerr, in fact.

"We moved to Sicily shortly after Brexit, but we'd planned this for ages," says Kerr. "I had been coming here regularly for a lot of years, even before I'd got the hotel up and running. Charlie had been coming here on and off too – he'd been living in Rome for a while – and we had always said, 'Hey, when we're old guys, we're going to live in the south of Italy'. And then one day we suddenly went, 'Hang on, we *are* old guys…', so we thought we'd better get on with it."

Kerr and Burchill have known one another for more than half a century, their friendship enduring through the band's countless records, tours and line-up changes. It's intriguing that two guys who grew up living down the road from each other in Glasgow in the 1960s should now be living down the road from each other in a small town in Sicily in the 2020s. Actually, it's more than intriguing. It's a bit weird, isn't it?

"It is weird…" begins Burchill, giving a big smile and then pausing for a moment or two, as if he's thinking about rowing back on that answer. "Well, OK, yeah, it's weird… but it's great."

And his smile, which rarely leaves his face during all the time that I spend with him, gets even bigger.

Simple Minds have just released a new album. It's called 'Direction Of The Heart' and it's a terrific record, upbeat and brimming with confidence, jam-packed with huge waves of synths and razor-sharp guitar lines. The group have put out some pretty strong material over the last decade or so, their 2018 album 'Walk Between Worlds' rightly reaching the UK Top Five, but this trumps anything they've done in a very long time.

Before we get to the contents of 'Direction Of The Heart', we need to talk about its striking cover – a black, sinister, military-style gas mask covered in flowers. Look closely and you'll see other little elements too, including some butterflies, a golden Cupid blowing a horn, a bird's nest with three eggs in it, a scales of justice keyring, a plastic model of a kissing couple, and a ringed planet reflected in one of the eye lenses.

Ahead of my interview with Kerr and Burchill, the group's press officer hooks me up with the sleeve designer, Stuart Crouch, so I can email him a few questions. Crouch, who has worked with everybody from Kate Bush to Iron Maiden and has created several Simple Minds covers in the past, tells me that every track on the album is represented in the image in some way. He says the starting point for the mask was the Covid pandemic and he mentions 'Logan's Run', Michael Anderson's 1976 sci-fi film, in particular the scene where Logan comes across the abandoned city of Washington DC, where the streets and buildings are choked with trees and vines and other vegetation.

"I was really interested to read Stuart's email to you," notes Kerr. "To be honest, we didn't have too much dialogue with him on this, other than talking about the key idea for the album, which was to make a feel-good record. I was kind of shocked when I saw the artwork, but it felt so right I didn't even think to ask him for an explanation of it."

"What Stuart said was news to me too," admits Burchill. "But I loved the image from the first moment I saw it. I liked the fact that it threw up so many questions. There's often a tenuous link between artwork and music, isn't there? You can make ideas fit, but it's a gut thing – you like it, you don't like it, you think it resonates – and with this one, as soon as we saw it, we thought, 'Well, we don't know where he's got this from, but it's brilliant."

"I've never seen 'Logan's Run', but I understand the reference to it," says Kerr. "I mean, everyone was thinking about the lockdown as like being in a science fiction movie. There was no other way to rationally explain it. There was that idea of nature taking over as well, you know, you could hear the birds singing and people were seeing deer in their back gardens. So in that sense, something good came out of it. The world had a chance to rest."

And while the pandemic meant a lot of bands had to work remotely via the internet, Kerr and Burchill were left to their own devices in Sicily. They were able to see each other and work together on the tracks for their new album on a daily basis.

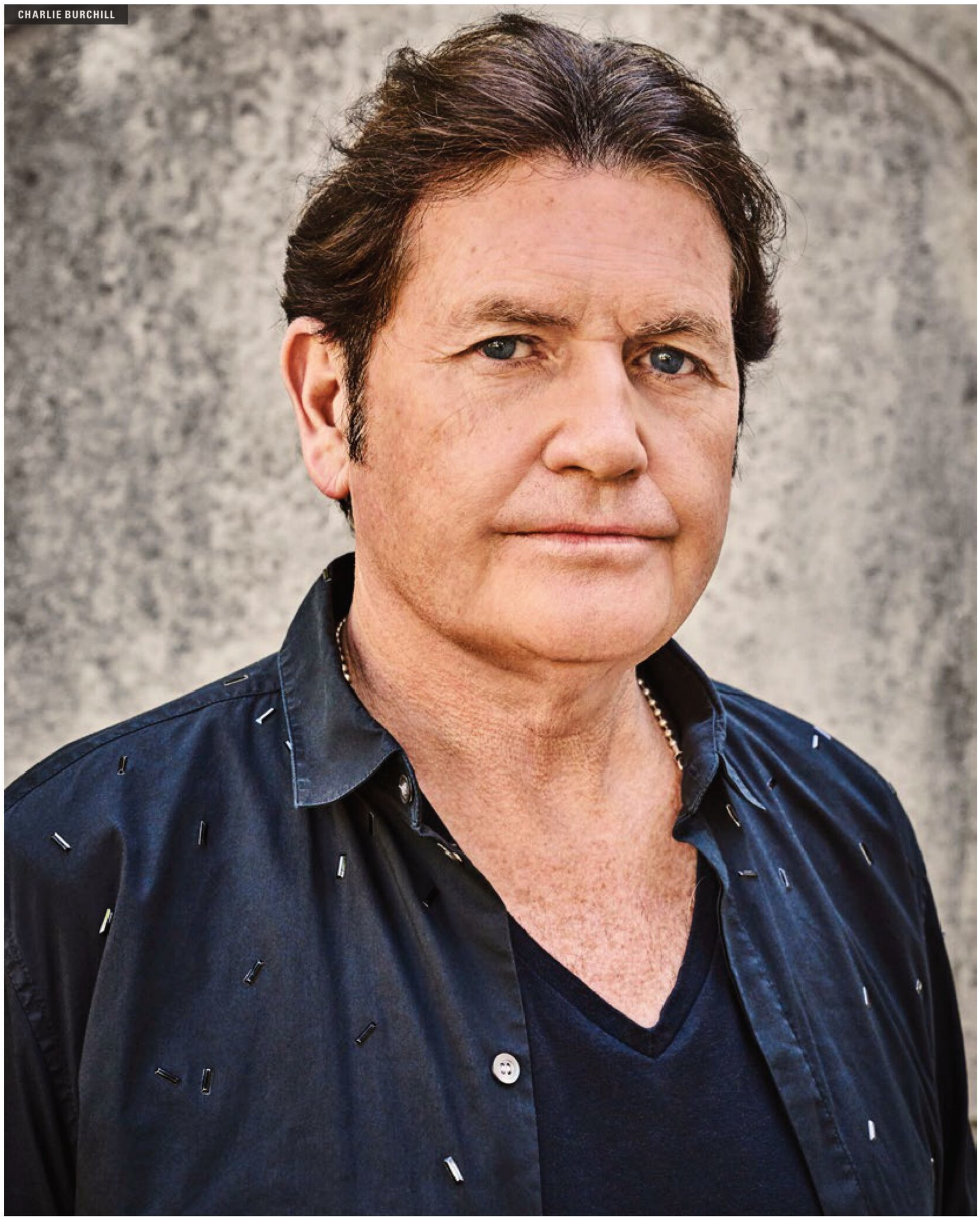
"We were very lucky to be in this beautiful place," says Kerr. "We had blue skies and nobody to trouble us. Looking out at Etna every day had an impact on us too. It has a menacing presence, but it also has a benevolent presence. It's continually throwing out volcanic material, it's like a sand, and the land is so fertile as a result. It goes back to when Sicily was the bread basket of the Roman Empire. The locals look on it as being like a mother, because it feeds the island. When you look at something of that stature, of that power, and you dwell on it for a couple of minutes and realise how this thing has seen it all, that puts everything into a different perspective.

"Something else we reflected on during that time was how it had been for us in the early days of the band. We were 19 or 20 years old and the only thing in our lives was music. There was nothing else we wanted to do. Music meant everything to us and we did it 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And guess what? The pandemic made us go back to that. Because you couldn't see the kids or the grandkids. Friends weren't dropping in. The restaurants were shut. The football was cancelled. So the only thing we had in our lives again was the music and I think this album has really benefitted from that.

"On the downside, I had to close the hotel when the restrictions kicked in. So never mind all that stuff about 'Logan's Run'. For Charlie and me, rattling around this empty hotel looking for any bars that still had peanuts in them, it was more like the fucking 'Shining'."

JIM KERR

CHARLIE BURCHILL



'Direction Of The Heart' is the 18th or 19th or possibly even 20th Simple Minds studio album. It depends how you count them. Is the 1981 combo of 'Sons And Fascination' and 'Sister Feelings Call' one album or two? Should 'Our Secrets Are The Same', the disc of fresh material included on their 2004 five-CD 'Silver Box' collection, be on the list? Answers on a postcard, please.

The new album begins with a supercharged synthpop track, the euphoric and infectious 'Vision Thing'. It's a deeply personal song for Kerr. The lyrics are a tribute to his dad, who sadly died in 2019.

"My dad was my best pal," he says. "He worked in construction, he was a builder, but he regularly went to the theatre and he was always in the library. He had this endless curiosity, this voracious appetite for learning. He had a massive influence on me and he was a great champion of the band too. He gave me £100 for us to do our first demos – and he was fond of reminding me I never paid him the money back.

"Charlie and I were writing songs in Glasgow when we found out that my dad was very seriously ill. I was distraught, but after a couple of days my dad insisted we got back to work. So we carried on working during the day and then I'd go up to the house and sit with him, chatting late into the evenings. Charlie would sit with him as well. And while I was there, he'd ask me to fetch him things from the attic. When I was in there, I found lots of press cuttings about the band and about me that my mum and dad had collected over the years, all these interviews with me as a young person. It was interesting how reading some of those made me feel.

"So 'Vision Thing' is about my dad and it's also about this young guy that I used to be. I guess it's essentially a celebration of life. And even if I say so myself, I think it's a wonderful song. We've been playing it live this year and it's been going down well – and it can be hard on a new song when you play it alongside material that everybody knows. It's been fantastic to see people leaping about to it, to see they're feeling the joy in it."

'Vision Thing' is followed by the post-punky 'First You Jump', another song with a positive message – "First you jump / Then get wings" – and oodles of oomph. But while the energy of the first two tracks is maintained throughout the album – expect head-nodders and foot-tappers from start to finish – the lyrics sometimes edge into darker places.

Kerr has never been afraid to tackle political and social issues, which he does here with tracks such as 'Human Traffic', 'Who Killed Truth?' and 'Planet Zero', the latter with its repeated refrain of "I saw a whole world of fire". From climate change to dodgy politicians to the global economic crisis, he's been spoiled for choice in recent times. To which we can now add a war raging in Europe and the renewed threat of nuclear conflict, making the mask on the record cover even more unsettling.

"Everybody is struggling to digest what's happening around them, because it seems to be coming in a perfect storm," says Burchill. "I think we captured some of it on the album, although it feels like it has got even worse since we finished the record. A song like 'Who Killed Truth?' is definitely of its time, you know, with all of the bullshit we have to deal with from these liars who don't even care that people know they're lying."

'Human Traffic' is also notable because it features Sparks singer Russell Mael on guest vocals. Kerr and Burchill first met Mael when he suddenly popped up backstage after a Simple Minds gig in Los Angeles.

"We started working on that song four or five years ago," says Burchill. "We loved it, absolutely loved it, but it wasn't ready for the record we were making at that time. We hadn't got it quite right. But when Jim came back to it and said, 'We need to do something with this track, we can't just leave it', I agreed with him. I'd always thought it was really innovative. It didn't sound like anyone else, with the exception of Sparks. Whenever we worked on it, I kept saying how it made me think of Sparks."

"I'd always felt that there was something missing from it, but I wasn't able to articulate what it was," notes Kerr. "I felt it needed an almost cartoon element. I mean, you've got this punchy chorus, but the lines are 'The whole world circles round and goes back again / It's high on fumes and misery', so how do you make people feel good about that? Charlie and I have been fans of Sparks since we were kids – Charlie's elder brother Jamie, who was the cool guy on the housing scheme where we grew up, had turned us onto them even before they had their first hit – and there was something about Russell that always made me feel good. We were delighted when he said he was happy to be involved."

"I was really blown away by what he did," adds Burchill. "He came up with a ton of stuff for the track. It was incredible. It wasn't like he had simply sat down and sung the vocal parts. He had quite an intricate plot going on and we ended up using lots of it because it worked so well. It was so in sync with what we were trying to do."

The idea of mass movement that's explored here and in a couple of other places on the album seems to be something that Kerr has returned to many times over the years.

"They say most artists only have two or three themes – even the greatest ones – and movement has most definitely been a regular theme for me," he acknowledges. "So, yeah, people on the move, the world on the move, and why that might be happening. People running from what? Running to where? Sometimes it's a riff on those ideas, so it can be a bit abstract, but 'I Travel' is still the song that sums it up better than anything else. Charlie and I have always enjoyed travelling and visiting loads of different places. We started hitch-hiking when we were 16 and we still love the feeling that anything could be over the horizon."

It's interesting that Kerr mentions 'I Travel', the opening cut of the band's acclaimed 1980 album 'Empires And Dance', with its references to evacuees, refugees and marching men.

"Looking at the newspapers now... Jesus Christ, there are stories about armies fighting and right-wing extremists being voted into power in European countries," he says. "Perhaps when you get to a certain age, you realise it's always the same thing over and over. I mean, we've recently started playing 'Belfast Child' live again. A lot of people like it, but we hadn't played it for 25 years because I'm not that keen on it myself and we thought the story was done. Belfast was fine. The song was no longer relevant. But actually, it's not only about Belfast, it's about war and violence in general. And guess what? That's all very much back again."

'Human Traffic' is not the only track on 'Direction Of The Heart' that goes back a number of years, but then a lot of Simple Minds' songs seem to have a lengthy gestation period. Whereas most bands are generally quick to dump material that they feel is not working and lock it away forever, Kerr and Burchill frequently revisit and refashion unreleased tracks, sometimes again and again, to get them where they want them to be. Why is that?

"Songs need to find their moment," declares Burchill. "So we don't often think, 'That's not cutting it', we're more likely to think, 'That's not right at this time', and everything's still possible when you take that view. We can return to a track and say, 'OK, let's try it again, let's see if it's relevant now', and then it will come back into the frame. If you can figure out what's wrong with it, or maybe what's right with it, then you'll know where to take it. Mind you, even when we've nailed something, we'll sometimes ditch it at the last minute and it will go back into the cupboard."

So is there an extensive archive of unfinished material waiting for you to still delve into?

"I suppose there is quite a bit. Well, yeah, there's loads. We always start from scratch when we're working on a new album, though. And then what tends to happen is Jim will come to me and say, 'I've been listening to some of that old stuff…'. And then I'll go, 'Oh no…'."

"It can get a little intense when we are busy working on a record, a little claustrophobic, so we have what we call 'free weeks', where we play around with an idea we've set to one side, or try a cover, or do something that's just for fun," elaborates Kerr. "I've read that Pablo Picasso often used to go back to old works he had done. Oh, listen to me, comparing us to Picasso. Anyway, he'd turn paintings to the wall and leave them for years before turning them back. And Martin Scorsese used to have scripts going back 15 years."

One of the tracks on the album that has come to fruition through their "free weeks" is 'Act Of Love', the original version of which dates back 45 years, to the earliest days of Simple Minds. The song was written by Kerr and Burchill after the pair's short-lived punk outfit split up in November 1977, supposedly on the very day the group released their one and only record. Johnny & The Self Abusers' 'Saints And Sinners', a seven-inch single on Chiswick Records, is currently £35 on Discogs, by the way.

'Act Of Love' was the first song that Simple Minds played at their first gig, which took place at Satellite City in Glasgow in January 1978. A small club space situated in the upper regions of the cavernous Apollo, for a brief while Satellite City was Glasgow's equivalent to The Electric Circus in Manchester and Eric's in Liverpool. Elvis Costello, Magazine, The Rich Kids, Sham 69 and the UK Subs were among the bands that played there.

"We loved that place," says Burchill. "It used to be the Green's Playhouse and it was always an iconic venue. We'd been to see so many shows there, even before they called it Satellite City. I still remember that first gig of ours clearly. Like it was yesterday. We were supporting Steel Pulse that night. How's that for a bill?"

Not too shabby. Especially since, as well as Simple Minds and UK reggae stars Steel Pulse, the line-up also included a band called The Nu-Sonics, who evolved into Orange Juice a year or so later.

"'Act Of Love' was an easy track for us to go back to," continues Burchill. "I took a very irreverent approach to it. I was quite prepared for it to sound nothing like the original. There were some parts of it that sounded like it was written by two 15-year-olds, but the core element is the guitar riff and that's still all the way through it. I always think if you've got a great guitar riff and you can put it into an electronic context, you kind of get the holy grail."

"The guitar on 'Act Of Love' is incredible," adds Kerr. "By nature, I think I'm pretty modest, so when people ask me if I ever thought we were going to make it big in the early days of the band, I always say, 'No, it didn't dawn on me', but that's not quite true. Because the first time I heard Charlie play that riff, I remember thinking, 'Wow, David Bowie would want that riff, AC/DC would want that riff… that's a killer riff'. I also remember thinking, 'Charlie's got the goods'. Whether or not any of the rest of us had the goods, the jury's still out, but Charlie had the goods."

Kerr and Burchill present themselves in notably different ways during my conversation with them. Kerr wears his sunglasses throughout and remains relatively static. He is very engaged with the process, listening carefully to my questions and offering lengthy and detailed replies, generally speaking slowly and deliberately. In marked contrast, Burchill is far more animated, fidgeting in his seat, his eyes darting around him, his hands waving about. He laughs a lot, cracking a couple of jokes along the way, and there's that big smile of his too. You can't help but smile back at him.

Something else that strikes me is how much Kerr and Burchill each talk about the other. In fact, they seem to talk more about their bandmate than they do about themselves. It really is astonishing that they've been friends since they were eight years old, their mutual love of music strengthening the bond between them and adding cement to their relationship when they reached their early teens.

"Charlie was the first kid on our street to have a guitar," says Kerr. "You know how you used to get cigarette coupons back in the day? And your mum and dad would save them up and then send away to get a new hairdryer or some new saucepans or something? Well, Charlie's mum sent away all their coupons and got him this guitar."

"She used her Embassy coupons," laughs Burchill. "But I'm not sure you could call it a guitar. It was more like a cheese grater with strings. My eldest brother could play a bit, so he taught me a couple of chords and helped me to get started."

"And within a month, he could play anything," says Kerr. "We'd see him out in the street with the guitar and we'd say, 'Come on Charlie, play something', and he would. He was brilliant, even then. So that was pretty special."

"I remember Jim starting to push me after I got the guitar," says Burchill. "It was almost like he was my manager, you know, encouraging me and getting on my case – but in a good way. After a while, he started writing lyrics and I soon realised he wasn't just having a wild stab at this. What he was doing had some depth to it and you could tell that when we were 13 or 14 years old. The other thing about Jim was he was very charismatic and there was something about the clothes he wore and the way he carried himself. I don't know what it was, but he always looked like he was in a band. He always had that thing about him."

How would you describe your relationship now? How has it changed over the years?

"To think about it in a black-and-white way, I'd say we're like an older and younger brother, with Jim as the older brother," answers Burchill. "Funnily enough, I'm the youngest of three boys and Jim is the oldest of three boys, so it's strange how these kind of real dynamics come out. And looking back on it, I don't think much has changed since the beginning. We both do exactly what we have always done. Jim does the lyrics and the conceptual side of things, he has the ideas and he works with the management, whereas I deal with the music side of it. And then whenever we can, we sit in a room and play songs together."

"It's a bonus that we have so much in common," says Kerr. "I mean, if I've not seen Charlie for a while, you can guarantee we'll have bought the same books, or seen the same films, or developed the same thoughts on something. But because our roles and our personalities are so different, we never cross over. I have zero interest in getting involved with the music and he has zero interest in getting involved with the lyrics. So when he does something, he comes with his own chemistry set, and I'll go, 'Wow, listen to that', rather than going, 'Oh, that's a G and that's a B minor'. Similarly with Charlie, he'll say, 'I can't believe you came up with that lyric because that's precisely the atmosphere I was thinking of'. It all works really well like that."

Do you argue much? Have you ever fallen out badly?

"We have a colossal fight every year or so, with screaming and borderline violence," chuckles Kerr. "It's usually because one of us says a word that's just the wrong fucking word. But it's forgotten by the next day, which I believe is unusual. And when we do argue, I think it shows how passionate we are about what we're doing… and that's true even at this stage in the game for us. We both care about the band so much that it's worth the grief whenever there is grief. I think that's made us the kind of marathon men we are, whereas the other people we've worked with over the years, as great as they were, they were sprinters."

SIMPLE MINDS

After some fairly pedestrian albums either side of the new millennium, two things seem to have given Simple Minds a boost in the early 2010s. The first was the addition of bass player Ged Grimes to the group. Grimes, formerly of smooth pop-rockers Danny Wilson, has co-written 'First You Jump' as well as another song, 'Solstice Kiss', on 'Direction Of The Heart'.

The second thing was their ingenious '5X5 Live' project in 2012, a series of 16 live shows at which they performed five tracks from each of their first five albums – 'Life In A Day', 'Real To Real Cacophony', 'Empires And Dance', 'Sons And Fascination'/'Sister Feelings Call' and 'New Gold Dream (81-82-83-84)'. A selection of the shows were recorded, with the best renditions of the 25 songs released as a double CD at the end of the year.

"I'd agree that doing '5X5 Live' helped to rebuild our confidence," says Kerr. "It acted as a sort of bridge and gave us some leverage going forwards. It was our manager's idea and we weren't sure to begin with. In the old days, it would have been one of those half-two-in-the-morning discussions when we were stoned. Then you'd get up the next morning and say, 'What the fuck was that you were going on about last night? Five tracks from five albums? Don't be ridiculous'."

"It made us think a little bit more about the art," adds Burchill. "We were able to get quite forensic with the material, making sure we kept faithful to the originals. For something like that, you don't want to interpret the songs differently. That would have been a bummer. And everybody who came to the gigs knew what was happening. They knew they wouldn't be getting 'Don't You (Forget About Me)' and if we played a track like 'This Fear Of Gods' then it would be eight minutes long."

What's your view of those five albums now?

"I think I'm able to say this without feeling, because it's been such a long time…" begins Kerr, trailing off and struggling to find the right words. "I think those young guys… I mean, what an amazing thing, you know, to have that sort of imagination. We were learning every day and we were just going into the studio with our imaginations and desires and fantasies and wilfulness. I see those records as being important on lots of levels."

This year is the 40th anniversary of 'New Gold Dream' and I suspect many of the group's fans would probably say it was their favourite Simple Minds album. Is it their favourite?

"No, it's not mine," says Kerr. "My favourites are 'Empires And Dance' and 'Sons And Fascination'. I see them as the storm before the clearing, which was 'New Gold Dream'. But I love 'New Gold Dream' for what it did and I loved the process of making it. It rolled, it was beautiful, and there were very few things that needed to be wrestled to the ground. Coming out of the speakers, everything about it felt right. When you're a young band, you take all of your influences and that's the soil in which you are hopefully going to be able to grow something that's intrinsically you. And by 'New Gold Dream', I think it was intrinsically us.

"That album was also totally of its moment. For me, there was something special about the musical landscape of the period. I remember first hearing 'Love Action' by The Human League… that intro was so great. And, my god, The Associates, they were just, 'Wow, what is *this*?'. Then there was The Cure… I could go on and on. It was a new kind of pop music and these bands were getting on the cover of both NME and Smash Hits, whereas it would have been one or the other before then. 'New Gold Dream' was the record that enabled us to do the same."

"To be honest, I believe we lucked out on 'New Gold Dream'," says Burchill. "I don't think we had a clue what sort of record we were making, but it ended up being very cohesive, something that was quite gentle and quite wonderful. I find it difficult to compare our albums, but for my money some of the most interesting music we've come up with is on 'Sons And Fascination' and 'Sister Feelings Call'. A lot of the stuff on those albums is really out there. I wouldn't say that they're the best songs we've ever written, but I love the whole vibe of them.

"I'm not sure about 'New Gold Dream' necessarily being the fans' favourite album, though. For a lot of people, 'Once Upon A Time' and 'Street Fighting Years' were enormous records, particularly outside the UK. 'Real Life' too, which came out in the 90s. Some places didn't get all of the British 80s music at the time, so they picked up on the bands much later. When we do shows in Spain and Portugal, for example, people go berserk when we start playing 'Let There Be Love', which was a single from 'Real Life'. It's like we're doing 'Don't You (Forget About Me)'."

Simple Minds have flirted with various different styles of music from one album to another, but there has usually been a place for electronics in their sound. Even when they edged into more obviously guitar-based material in the late 1980s, at which point they were in full stadium band mode, they were never a rock outfit. Not a conventional one, anyway.

"I hate power chords and we come down hard on ourselves if things start getting too rocky live," declares Burchill. "I try to make music that's melodic and colourful and atmospheric, so beyond the chords it's about looking to create more space in the tracks. But, yes, the electronic side is a big part of what we do. I've got lots of fantastic pieces of synthy gear – VCS 3s, an old Elka Synthex, old Rolands… I've collected loads of it over the years. To be honest, I always wanted to be more of a keyboard player than a guitarist."

"By its very nature, a guitar pulls you into the rock world," says Kerr. "The language around it can get kind of clumsy, but I think we're an art-rock band at our roots. I think you'd have to be an art-rock band to come up with songs like 'Vision Thing' and 'Human Traffic'."

L-R: GED GRIMES, CHARLIE BURCHILL, CHERISSE OSEI, GORDY GOUDIE, JIM KERR, BERENICE SCOTT AND SARAH BROWN

Unlike many of their contemporaries, Simple Minds have never stopped recording new material, the longest gap between their studio albums being 60 months. They've also never stopped touring, taking to the road most years since 1978. The live band currently totals seven people – including sometime Heaven 17 keyboard player Berenice Scott and former Faders drummer Cherisse Osei – and they have clocked up more than 80 gigs this year alone, performing a set that lasts two-and-a-half hours. Jim Kerr's description of himself and Charlie Burchill as "marathon men" seems very apt. Forces of nature and then some.

"Thankfully, Jim's a monk," laughs Burchill. "He doesn't smoke, he doesn't drink, he looks after himself, he sleeps all the time…"

What about you?

"Well, I do like my whisky," he grins. "But it's about managing yourselves. When you're touring, you feel you've got to go out there and get a win. People who say they don't experience that, I don't think they are telling the truth. Even if you have a partisan audience, you've still got to get that reaction and then keep the levels up, so that becomes your drive."

"One of the things we've been blessed with is energy," states Kerr. "And when you think about it, it's really all about energy – creative and physical – and desire. The desire to go somewhere and the energy to do it. Some people have said it's the Protestant work ethic, but that's not right because we are both Catholics. But it is true that, when Monday morning comes around, I'll always be thinking, 'OK, what are we going to do now?'."

"Bang goes my free time," sighs Burchill.

"The thing is, if you have a 40-year career, there'll be times where you're up and times when you're down, when the energy isn't what it once was, when no one's interested in you," continues Kerr. "I remember my dad asking me about this. I remember him saying, 'How long is this going to last?'. And I said, 'Look, if you're lucky enough to be in a band that's had success, you'll probably get it in the neck when the next generation comes along, and it'll be time to go away when everyone's had enough of your schtick'. Then I said, 'But if you can hang in there and not do anything too desperate, people might re-evaluate what you are doing, and maybe they'll fancy you again, maybe they'll be up for it again'. So my dad thought about that for a few seconds and then he went, 'A bit like Hush Puppies?'."

At which point, Kerr laughs so much, he can barely get his words out.

"I said to him, 'Well, yeah, a bit like fucking Hush Puppies'. But he did sort of have a point. You know, nobody wants to touch them for years and then someone in Greenwich Village decides, 'Hey, you know what? Hush Puppies are the thing'. So I suppose there's some of that going on with Simple Minds. There's a bit of Hush Puppies about us."

Something else that has never stopped is Kerr getting on Burchill's case. In a good way, of course.

"I'll be sitting in my apartment and the call will come in," says Burchill. "It's like John Lennon and Ringo Starr when Paul McCartney was calling them all the time. I'll be like, 'Oh no, it's him on the phone again'. It's the same as it was when we were kids, you know, but this is how it works with us. So we'll finish a tour, we'll leave the band at the hotel, and Jim and I will have an early flight to Italy. We'll be sitting on the plane at seven in the morning and he'll turn to me and say, without any hint of irony, 'You'd better get started on the next album when we get back'. And I'll be like, 'Hmmm'. Jim can see my apartment from his apartment, so I have to lay low when we get home, otherwise he'll be coming round or calling up and saying, 'I've had an idea…'. That's usually how it starts."

I suggest to Burchill that he needs to keep his blinds down.

"I know. I think I might need to get some sunglasses and a wig too."

'Direction Of The Heart' is out now on BMG

SPACE INVADER

Lucrecia Dalt's latest album is a sumptuous and radiant sci-fi meditation in which the bolero, salsa, mambo and merengue influences she absorbed throughout her childhood are refracted through "machinic distortions". But an alien presence is lurking...

WORDS: CLAIRE FRANCIS
PICTURES: AINA CLIMENT

Aliens. Deep philosophical musings. Machine-processed tropical rhythms. Spanish spoken-word lyrics stretched into unimaginable shapes. If there's anyone who can weave these colourful, diverse elements into a cohesive whole, it's Lucrecia Dalt. The electronic musician from Colombia has made her name with conceptual, often cryptic work that's both beautiful and strange. From the opaque soundscapes of 2013's 'Syzygy' and the gothic, folkloric experimental pop of 2018's 'Anticlines', to the score for 'The Seed' – a film about an extraterrestrial invasion, released earlier this year – Dalt's work is characterised by a singular vision.

She has called Berlin home for the past eight years, and is speaking from her apartment/music studio in the city's leafy Alt-Treptow suburb. But Latin sounds and syncopations have always underpinned her music, no matter how deconstructed or minimal it might be. Her latest album, '¡Ay!', is part future-facing sci-fi adventure and part nostalgic invocation of the music that soundtracked her childhood.

"My mother's side of the family was extremely interested in music and collecting records," she explains. "There was always someone coming to the house to sell records to my mom. Buying records in Colombia was very difficult because there were so few shops, especially in my hometown, which is not a big city.

"When I was a teenager, to get a record, you asked someone who was going to the States to buy it for you, or you had a bootleg cassette. But there was a big distribution related to Latin American or folk music. So that was what I was listening to – bolero, merengue, salsa, cumbia…"

Of course, in Dalt's hands, these traditional genres – which grew out of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, and were themselves informed by African cultures – are given a curious, contemporary slant. Together with collaborator Alex Lázaro, she has arranged rich, live percussion and woodwind instruments, processed – as described in the press notes – by "memory and modular synths".

"For this album, it was actually bolero that I wanted to explore," she says. "When I started to work with Alex, I began to go further into the possibilities – like slowed-down salsa or influences from merengue, but not specifically the rhythm. I was pretty much just romanticising my memories of being with my family, listening to boleros and dancing a lot."

When I ask if she misses her birth country, her response is vigorous and emphatic.

"I miss my parents, of course. I miss the spontaneity of life there and I miss the food very much. But I've been away for 13 years. Colombia is obviously complex, and it's always been that way. Having had the chance to develop what I do in such a way here has been so important."

Before she took up music full-time, Dalt was a geotechnical engineer, which she enjoyed but knew would never be enough.

"I was having a happy life," she says. "But it was always going to be the same, you know. I would have been someone's boss. If you're a musician, life is not gonna be boring."

There was a definitive point – the fabled lightbulb moment – when she realised she wanted to pursue a creative path. It was prompted, she explains, by a conversation with her father.

"It was a very peculiar call that I got from my dad. I was working as an engineer but making tracks for compilations, and I was DJing quite a lot. I had my first show in 2003 in Bogota. My father called me once and asked, 'What's happening with the music?', and I was like, 'It's starting to make sense'. We had a long chat and I somehow interpreted it as 'Maybe you should quit engineering and try it'. Which is totally bizarre, because I didn't think my dad would suggest I lose the security of my job, and he doesn't remember that conversation now.

"My partner at the time really encouraged me as well. I was trying to figure out a way to have some income for myself. I've been sewing clothes all my life, so I was like, 'OK, maybe I can give sewing classes half the day and then the rest of the time I can make music. And that's what I did for quite a while."

It wasn't only Dalt's family who had faith in her musical ability. Early in her career, she was championed by two influential figures in electronic music, and she firmly believes this had a lasting impact on her subsequent sonic trajectory.

"Gudrun Gut's appearance in my life totally shifted things," she affirms. "She's so amazing. It was in the time of Myspace. I received a message from her and I honestly thought it was spam. I was like, 'No, this is not possible'."

The German innovator – an early member of Einstürzende Neubauten and founding member of Mania D, Malaria! and Matador – asked Dalt to contribute some tracks to an instalment of her '4 Women No Cry' series of compilations that promote unknown female musicians. It was 2008, a time when Dalt was releasing music under the mononym Lucrecia.

"It was this sort of miracle of Myspace," she says. "We did the compilation, and actually the very first tour I did in Europe was because Gudrun organised it. Since then, she's been hugely supportive throughout the years. She is so interested in opening space and opportunities for musicians. I owe her a lot."

Six years later, in 2014, she released an eponymous EP on Other People, the label run by Chilean-American electronic musician Nicolás Jaar.

"With Nicolás, it was a similar situation," she laughs. "I received an email from him and also thought it was spam. He's extremely minimal in his communication. Everything was super-abstract, and everything was done via email. One day, I said, 'Hey, do you exist? And why do you speak English to me when we can speak in Spanish?'. We only actually met in person for the first time last year. He was lovely, and we did speak Spanish, which was nice.

"Nowadays, I feel more fluid in English, but back in the day I was trying to accommodate the way an English speaker would interact, which is a bit more distant. And then there's me, being totally Latin and sending kisses and hugs to everybody. So being able to switch to Spanish and feeling the commonality was just great."

Dalt's mother tongue is a focal point on '¡Ay!'. Her luminous vocals sit forward in the mix, and it's the first time she has sung entirely in Spanish since 'Syzygy'. Non-Spanish speakers shouldn't despair, though – the lyrics are often difficult to interpret, even for native speakers.

"There are tracks where you can't understand the lyrics because of the way I'm elongating the words," she explains. "Reconnecting with the possibilities of the language was a beautiful exercise. Maybe I was fooling myself in the past, thinking English might be a little more elastic… but, no [laughs]."

This leads us to Preta, the alien character who is the album's protagonist. In this metaphysical odyssey, Dalt acts as a third-person narrator, articulating the monologues of a being who has fashioned a material body from evaporated dead skin gathered in the Earth's hydrosphere.

"It was great to be speaking from another type of subjectivity, so that I felt less exposed with my own feelings," she says.

Dalt often creates music "in character". On 'Anticlines', she embodied El Boraro, a mythological creature from Colombian folklore that kills its victims and then inflates their skins like balloons. I have to ask her what the obsession is with…

"Skins and bodies?" she interjects, anticipating the question. "Yeah, I don't know [laughs]. But I love building a whole world around an album. And also for performing, it helps me a lot to be in character. When we perform the new album live, I'll play synths and be singing – there's quite a lot of performance on my side. It's something between a concert and a play, without being either. I'll be in character as Preta, even in my interactions with the audience. I'm playing bass with a shoe on one track… I like to make it fun and enjoyable!"

With Preta, Dalt explains she was inspired by conversations with her friend, the philosopher Miguel Prado. At one point, she became fascinated by the Triángulo Del Silencio (Silent Triangle), an area in Spain's Balearic Islands which has been compared to the Bermuda Triangle.

"I was thinking about something simple like, 'Where do our skin particles go?'," she muses. "Where is consciousness located and is it related to anything material? Scientists are still trying to figure it out. Could intelligence exist without being embodied?

"On 'Anticlines', I was thinking about atmospheres and borders, about the edge of the solar system – and about the difference when passing from one layer to another. So when I found the Triángulo Del Silencio myth, it was fascinating. A body without organs just walking like a balloon. It's an extreme way to possess another."

'¡Ay!' is an alien romance, then – the story of an entity navigating our earthly realm, trying to make sense of the human concepts of love and time. The mood is certainly sensual. On the dramatic 'Atemporal', Dalt sings of timelessness and tears that are like crystals over a complex percussive arrangement. 'Gena' slinks along like a black cat crossing your path. With an abundance of languid rhythms and Dalt's silky, intimate vocals, the album conjures the quintessential romance of bolero music.

"There was this idea of negotiating all the things that have been important in my life, musically and artistically," she explains. "Up to 'No Era Sólida' [2020], I was either in denial or taming this other part of me that is definitely related to where I grew up and the kind of life, the lightness and the spirits of that part of the world.

"Until then, this kind of music had only been part of my personal life, except for certain rhythm patterns I was applying to some machines. It's a delicate thing to work with other genres, even if they were part of your upbringing. But I always wanted to make a bolero album. They're such romantic ballads."

The most straightforward bolero sequences on the album emerge in the opening and closing tracks, 'No Tiempo' and 'Epílogo'. There's also a lovely, woozy organ noise on both songs – a sentimental tone that inspires images of faded fairground rides.

"I have this very strong memory of going to a restaurant once in Colombia," recalls Dalt. "There was a man – and this was very common – playing one of those old organs with a drum machine, and he'd put on a bossa nova or samba rhythm. You find this kind of atmosphere in lots of Latin tracks."

Dalt says she particularly loves the work of Mexican musician Ernesto Hill Olvera, who was known for making his organ sound like it was talking. She describes him as "the Pete Drake of Latin America", referencing the American musician who was famed for making his steel guitar "talk".

"Do you use Spotify?" she asks. "I can share the playlist with you that I made of all the things that inspired the album. There's a song called 'Oración Caribe' by Olvera – it's beautiful."

Titled '¡Ay! Inspiration', Dalt's playlist is a treasure trove, packed with over three hours of music that ranges from crooners and 1950s R&B groups to songs by Grace Jones, Tom Waits, Serge Gainsbourg and Alice Coltrane. I'm struck immediately by the likeness between the Olvera track and the dreamy sounds of her own compositions on '¡Ay!'.

"I was focused on reducing the bolero to the minimal expression, but while still having all these romantic feelings," she explains. "So I was mixing that tradition with a feeling of something similar to what Alice Coltrane would be doing, with a lightness and organic style. That was the idea for 'No Tiempo'."

This lightness and playfulness – another key component of Dalt's work – is summed up cheekily by the album title. 'Ay' is a Spanish exclamation used to express emotion.

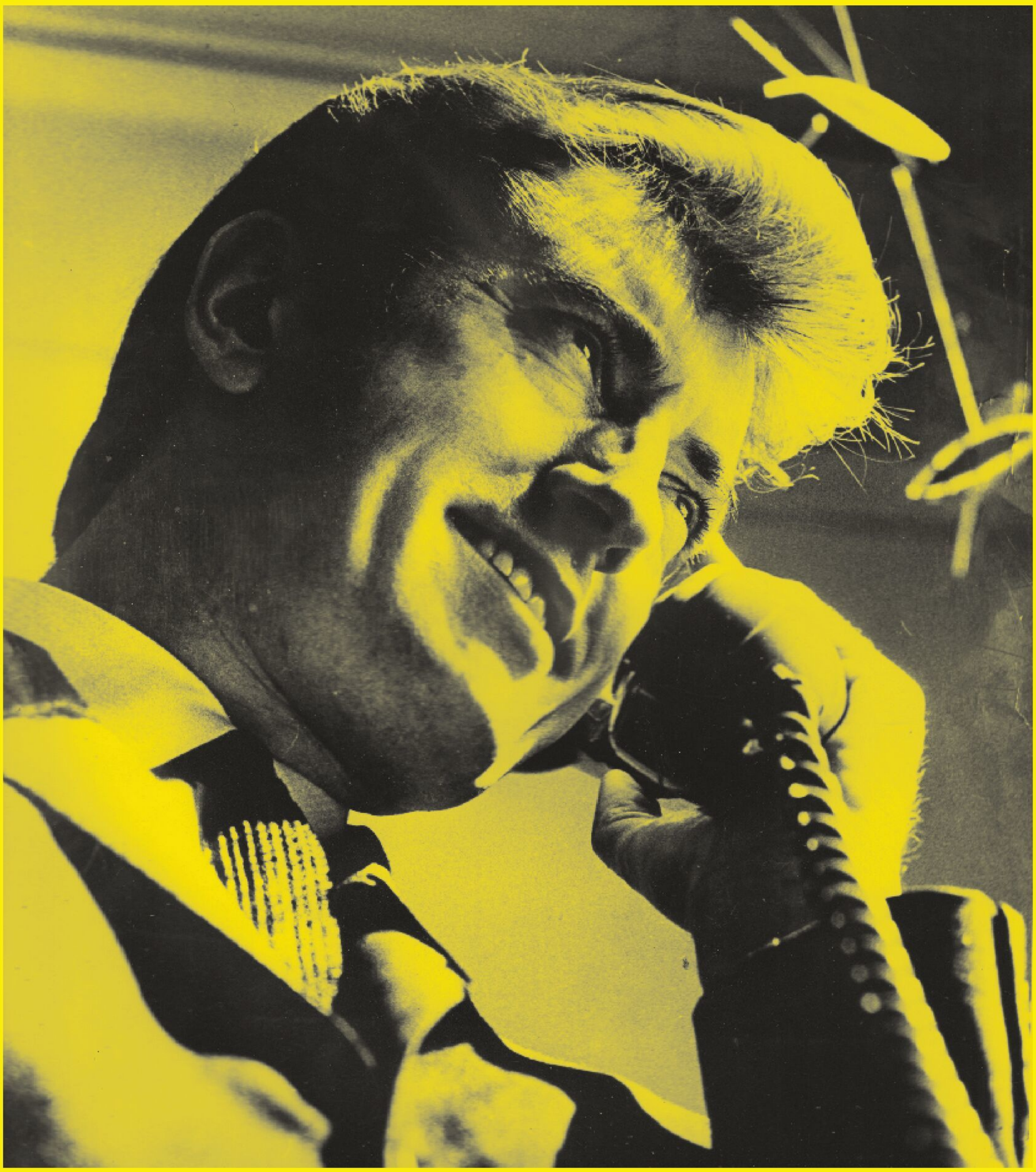
"I use it all the time," Dalt explains. "It's almost like my way to say, 'I know' or 'I see'. It can be positive or negative. It can indicate excitement. It can be a cry for help. And it's definitely an expression you hear a lot in this type of music, like at the beginning of sentences.

"So I feel it's something extremely simple that connects the Spanish-speaking countries. But also, because I stylise it with both exclamation marks, I thought it might be a way to suggest that there's something inside that is not so usual. It's really saying, 'Don't take me too seriously', especially not with this album – because I'm exploring and going in so many directions, and in so many different moods."

Those multiplicities of mood, musical direction and philosophical inspiration are what we've come to expect from Lucrecia Dalt's creative practice. On '¡Ay!', she reaches new heights in both her storytelling and her soundscapes. And she's right – what's inside is far from usual, but it's a wonderful world to lose yourself in for a while.

'¡Ay!' is out now on RVNG Intl

NO ORDINARY JOE



Hidden away for decades, Joe Meek's near-mythical "tea chest tapes" have finally seen the light of day, revealing much about the working practices of the legendary producer responsible for The Tornados' pioneering, electronically hued 1962 single, 'Telstar'

WORDS: JEREMY BLACKMORE

The unassuming consignment of two tonnes of packing boxes that arrived at the Western Star Studios near Bath in September 2020 seemed unlikely to reveal the working methods of one of the earliest pioneers of electronic sound. But the cargo was a unique treasure trove of musical history – the life's work of maverick producer, sound engineer and composer Joe Meek.

After Meek's untimely death at the age of 37, the famed "tea chest tapes" were rescued by Cliff Cooper, boss of Orange Amplifiers and whose band, The Millionaires, Meek had produced. After Cooper sold them on to record label Cherry Red in 2020, producer Alan Wilson and tape expert Martin Nichols spent the next 18 months painstakingly restoring and digitising the material, ready to share with an eager Meek fan base.

Wilson and Nichols faced a vast task. There were 1,864 individual 10-inch reels containing 10,000 separate takes. All were recorded at Meek's makeshift studio in his living room, situated above a leather goods shop at 304 Holloway Road, London, between late 1960 and his death in February 1967. It was a remarkable work rate at a time when home studios had yet to be conceived.

The tea chest tapes, so-called because they were sold in 67 tea chests, hold riches ranging from rock 'n' roll to freakbeat and psychedelia. Masters and signature chart hits such as 'Telstar' by The Tornados and John Leyton's echo-laden Number One, 'Johnny Remember Me', jostle for space with a host of previously unheard gems, from demo recordings by David Bowie's first band, The Konrads, to the 15-year-old Mark Feld, who would later become famous as Marc Bolan.

There are also several hours of Meek's adventures in electronic noise, including long ambient soundscapes and drones, unearthly effects, heavily processed and overdubbed drum tracks, and experiments with electronic organs – music that was years ahead of its time.

For Wilson, a lifelong Joe Meek enthusiast, assisting with the restoration was a real dream come true.

"It was an amazing experience to handle and finally get to listen to these recordings," he says. "I'd known of their existence but never dreamed I'd ever see or hear them, let alone be part of this project. It has been described as the most important haul in decades, so it felt quite a responsibility, not only to Cherry Red, who bought the tapes, but also to Joe Meek and to British music heritage."

Meek's interest in electronics and sound manipulation began as a teenager in the Gloucestershire market town of Newent, where he experimented with modified recorders and compiled his own effects tapes to use in productions by his local dramatic society. Such things were largely unheard of at the time.

"We don't really know how he achieved a lot of these sound manipulation effects, but he was very much ahead of the game, in the UK at least," says Meek historian Rob Bradford, who worked alongside Wilson to catalogue the archive. "In theory, he could have found employment at the BBC and become one of the top people, but that was probably just too narrow for him."

Meek moved into sound engineering in the 1950s and showed a flair for innovation – such as using compression on Humphrey Lyttelton's 'Bad Penny Blues'. Forming the short-lived Triumph Records label in 1960 allowed him to fully indulge both his passion for sound and lifelong obsession with outer space. An EP followed – an extract from Meek's intended "outer space music fantasy", entitled 'I Hear A New World', which draws parallels with Bebe and Louis Barron's groundbreaking, futuristic electronic score for the 1956 film, 'Forbidden Planet'.

But while the Barrons had an electronic sound studio and capital behind them, Meek had to develop his own effects and techniques from scratch on a shoestring. Describing his work as an attempt to "create a picture in music of what could be up there in outer space", he crafted otherworldly sounds over a basic rhythm track provided by skiffle band The Blue Men.

"He was capable of producing electronic sounds by using a sort of tone generator he built himself and shorting out electrical circuits, then manipulating it," says Bradford.

"People in the Joe Meek Society have spent countless hours trying to analyse the effects. He was always experimenting with recording something, manipulating it, then playing it backwards and recording it again. While some sounds were obvious, such as distorted rattling chains, with most it's very difficult to untangle what the original source might have been."

In 1960, Meek formed RGM Sound (later called Meeksville Sound) while living at Holloway Road and also working as an independent producer, leasing a continuous stream of recordings to the major labels.

Over the next six years, an endless procession of artists made their way up the winding wooden stairs to Meek's homespun studio. With drums set up in the fireplace and an echo chamber in the toilet, it was a far cry from Abbey Road, where George Martin had a team of assistants, sound recordists, engineers and tape operators on hand. But from this most unlikely of settings sprang a one-man hit factory, producing records with a unique sound that stood out at a time when rock 'n' roll still held sway.

But for Cliff Cooper's timely intervention, Meek's suicide in 1967 – after shooting dead his landlady, Violet Shenton, in a row over the rent – may have led to the loss of his precious archive. Cooper, who was in the process of building Orange Studios and seeking to capture some of the producer's magic, met with a solicitor handling Meek's estate to see if he could buy some of his recording equipment. The solicitor offered to sell Cooper the physical tapes as he couldn't bring himself to destroy them.

After 52 years as careful custodian, there was a feeling of closure when Cooper sold the collection on to Cherry Red, reassured that the label would release a wide range of material from it rather than focus purely on the big names.

Although Cooper had diligently preserved the tapes at an even temperature in his studios, they had inevitably deteriorated over time. This presented a number of challenges for Wilson and Nichols, who had to work with specialist equipment to clean them before they could start turning them into stable digital files.

The tapes themselves tell us much about Meek's working methods. There were many different types, with various manufacturers, thicknesses and chemical compositions. Meek had used several tape machines, too – mono, half-track and quarter-track – and even different recording speeds and equalisation settings, requiring other heads/machines and adjustments for correct playback.

To make matters worse, there was no technical documentation, and reels often contained both mono and stereo recordings. Meek reused tapes many times, so each track or session on a reel needed individual attention and alteration. For optimal sound quality, sections often had to be played back on different machines.

Several things stand out from listening to the collection – particularly how Meek would record five or six takes of a track and then blade together the best bits from each to make one great composite track.

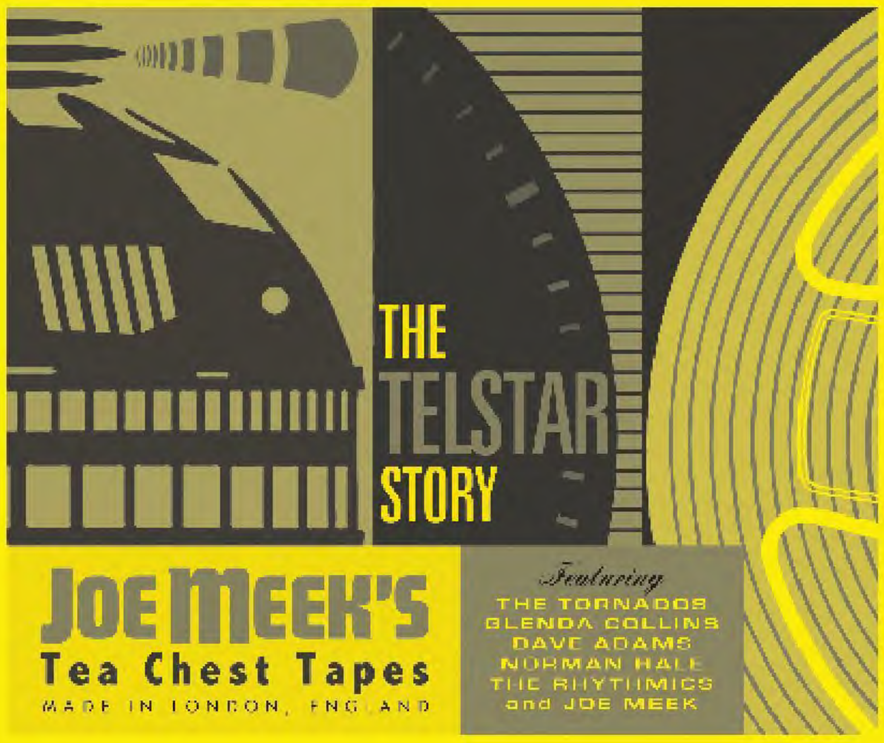
"He was clearly inventive and had the necessary ear for judging a performance," says Nichols. "This was essential for layering – bouncing from one tape machine to another while adding live musicians and singers, all as a continuous 'take'.

"However, I get the feeling that his technical handling was more chaotic than considered. We were struck by the lack of consistency in recording levels in his various sessions. The narrow window for optimal sound quality on these early tape machines – and tape of that vintage – may have produced the distortions that often characterised his work, possibly quite unintentionally."

Meek's reliance on second-hand tape suggests that budget was an issue. Large studios had access to dedicated chambers or plates, which offered excellent quality reverb. On the other hand, Meek had to make do with a simple spring-line unit (with a very twangy sound) for adding artificial reverb, or rely on the relatively small sound of the bathroom or stairwell with the performers positioned accordingly (the beat underpinning 'Have I The Right?', the 1964 single by The Honeycombs, was accentuated by the band stomping their feet on the staircase). It's clear from the collection that Meek frequently applied different amounts of echo or reverb to each track, pushing effects to the max.

"He made the best of these options, using them to add character," adds Nichols. "But I'm sure he would have loved access to something better. This probably explains his heavier reliance on tape echo – easy to achieve, better quality, less twang and opening the door to rhythmic effects."

"You couldn't believe he could get the sounds he did with the studio set-up he had," enthuses Tornados drummer Clem Cattini. "As far as sound was concerned, Joe Meek was a genius."



Born out of Meek's space obsession, the archive provides an intriguing aural record of the making of 'Telstar' and its progression from rough demos, through various overdub stages, to the final edited single.

Meek was one of millions who watched the first live TV transmission between the UK and the US in July 1962, courtesy of the Telstar satellite launched on top of a Thor-Delta rocket.

As Bradford says in his sleeve notes for Cherry Red's 2022 vinyl release, 'Joe Meek's Tea Chest Tapes: The Telstar Story', this was a remarkable technological innovation, and one that Meek could not shake from his head as he went to bed that night. He woke at around 5am, says Bradford, "with the beginnings of an insistent melody whirling around his mind".

Unable to play an instrument or notate music, Meek rushed downstairs to the studio and began humming and wailing his ideas onto tape. Over the next five days, his team of session musicians made sense of them, trying a variety of approaches to see what worked best. Amazingly, all of these recordings survived, allowing Bradford to piece together the whole story.

They include a piano demo by The Tornados' original keyboard player, Norman Hale, who became the first person to record 'Telstar' after Meek persuaded him to perform a demo on the jangly studio piano.

Dave Adams, who worked with Meek from 1958 to 1967, was later asked by him to record a clavioline demo of 'Telstar' over a Mike Berry backing track (Bradford says Meek had an "obsessive affinity" with the unique sound of the clavioline, the electronic keyboard which provided the eerie solo on Del Shannon's 1961 smash hit, 'Runaway'). A version of this can also be heard on 'The Telstar Story'.

Energised by the sessions, Meek ordered The Tornados back from a summer season with Billy Fury in Great Yarmouth to record at Holloway Road. After a long drive following a late-night gig, the sleep-deprived group set to work on a Sunday morning with Meek's howling demo played to them as a guide.

Cattini says the band first had to figure out the track's structure. He came up with the idea of using a rolling rhythm and the key change, while guitarist Alan Caddy worked out all the chords and Roger LaVern played electric organ.

But, unknown to the band, Meek still wasn't satisfied. He called in songwriter Geoff Goddard, and over the course of a six-hour session, overdubbed clavioline, additional piano parts and other instruments. The following day, Meek experimented with different mixes and edits, added esoteric effects (with some electronic sounds taken from 'I Hear A New World') and sped the track up slightly.

Exactly a week after Telstar's launch, Meek fired his acetates over to Decca, who – sensing the enormous public interest in the satellite – decided to rush-release the single. It was a wise decision. Not only did 'Telstar' top the UK charts for five weeks and end up as the best-selling single of 1962, it was also the first song by a British group to become Number One in the US.

The Tornados re-recorded 'Telstar' several times over the years in multitrack studios with computer technology. Cattini admits that they never got close to the sound Meek achieved.

While the tea chest tapes feature many of the usual artists associated with Meek – his protégé Heinz, Screaming Lord Sutch, John Leyton, Mike Berry, The Tornados and The Outlaws (whose ever-changing line-up included Ritchie Blackmore, who would later co-found Deep Purple, and Chas Hodges, who later became half of rockney duo Chas & Dave) – cataloguing them has required some top-grade detective work from Rob Bradford. Meek wrote very little on the tape boxes and the words seldom matched the contents. While Bradford has been able to identify a fair amount, many tracks may never be confirmed, given the sheer number of artists Meek recorded or brought in to overdub.

What do the recordings tell us about Meek the man? His temper was said to be legendary, yet while Clem Cattini said the pair had a number of disagreements, Alan Wilson claims that the material only shows Meek discussing things calmly, offering advice and constructive suggestions on ways to get a good take.

"Considering that so many sessions have survived in their entirety, I have not heard him raising his voice even once," adds Bradford. "I'm not saying Meek never did lose his temper, but it doesn't seem as common an occurrence as people might think."

One quiet moment captures his naive and charming musical philosophy. Trying to reassure a singer who was recording quasi-religious songs aimed at an older market, Meek talked about what he was hoping to achieve.

"All I've ever wanted to do with my music is just make good recordings, hope there are people listening and make them happy."

'Joe Meek's Tea Chest Tapes: The Telstar Story' is out now on Cherry Red

NORTH BY NORTHWEST

Concrete dreams and brutalist ideals... Gordon Chapman-Fox is Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan. His third album, 'Districts, Roads, Open Space', has just been released and he's here to talk about it. What's more, he's brought sandwiches

WORDS: BOB FISCHER
PICTURES: RICHARD LEA-HAIR

"They do 'The Hobbit' here in the summer," says Gordon Chapman-Fox, sitting on a park bench and taking a bite from a ham sandwich. "The Dukes Theatre puts it on. Those trees over there are The Shire, and the memorial itself is Lonely Mountain, where the dragon lives."

We're in Williamson Park in Lancaster with our packed lunches. I've brought prawn cocktail crisps and a Wispa Gold. Behind us looms the Ashton Memorial, a towering, green-domed (and reputedly haunted) Edwardian folly, while the trees before us frame spectacular mist-shrouded views of an autumnal Morecambe Bay. If this is Middle-earth, the elves talk like Thora Hird and eat hotpot for breakfast. But the use of public spaces for creative leisure? Entirely on-message.

In his slightly unwieldy guise as Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan, Chapman-Fox has crafted three albums of affectingly utilitarian synth instrumentals since 2020, all concerned with the intricacies of 1970s Lancashire urban planning, specifically the utopian dreams of the "new towns" of North-West England, with their concrete shopping arcades and brutalist bus stations.

His latest offering, 'Districts, Roads, Open Space', is strikingly evocative of an era when local councillors with comb-overs would loftily promise the hard-working families of Skelmersdale that, by the year 1995, they'd be whizzing to the shops on a monorail.

"The first album, 'Interim Report, March 1979', was very much based on buildings," explains Chapman-Fox. "And the second, 'People & Industry', is pretty self-explanatory, but this one is more about the lives led within the new towns. It coincided with a particularly low point during lockdown, when I was feeling very isolated, quite lonely and adrift.

"It seemed to tie in with how artificial the new towns felt, with designated areas for shopping, leisure and work, because human life isn't that structured. It's far more messy and organic. In the 70s, there was still a culture of men going out to work and their wives staying at home, and I felt sorry for all those women trapped in their houses day after day. So it was a kinship through lockdown with what they must have gone through."

The actual Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan was real, resulting in the ambitious, concrete-fuelled 1970s expansion of both places. And Chapman-Fox's childhood was spent at the heart of a proposed development which, if ambitious plans had ever come to fruition, would have brought together three neighbouring outposts into a similarly sprawling metropolis. It was the beginning of his fascination.

"Preston, Leyland and Chorley were going to become Central Lancashire New Town," he recalls. "The idea was abandoned, and only a few business parks and one new housing estate were built, but I knew kids that lived there. And a couple of hills away was Skelmersdale New Town...

"These places seemed exotic, but also quite alien and distant. You drive along a road, you come to a roundabout. You drive along another road and you come to another roundabout, you know? Where is everything? You can see houses in the distance, but you don't know how to get to them. It felt futuristic but artificial – like the Moonbase from 'Space: 1999'."

We're now walking up the hill to the cafe attached to the butterfly house. Cyclists, joggers and mums with mitten-wearing kids are eating scones around tables that rattle in the breeze. I'm keen to explore the chasm between the space-age visions of the 1970s planners, genuinely determined to remove northern families from the poverty of crumbling slums, and the eventual reality of piss-soaked concrete underpasses.

"There's that famous photo of Ena Sharples standing on a high-rise and looking out over the tenements of Salford," says Chapman-Fox. "That photograph encapsulates so much. Runcorn had the Southgate Estate, the most brutalist of the new estates, but it lasted barely 13 years before it was demolished. For a council to do something so radical, then pull it down a decade later [shakes his head]… I think my music actually sits in that gap. Between the attempts to make things better and the fact that, in some cases, they actually ended up worse."

So what went wrong?

"Well, the Southgate Estate was just bad design. They had one oil-based heating system for the whole complex, so the blocks near the centre were roasting and the rest were freezing cold. It might have looked fantastic to anyone who appreciates brutalism, but the practicalities were appalling.

"And growing up, I often went to Preston on the bus. You can buy tea towels of Preston bus station now – 'Look, it's a design classic!' – but I only remember the underground subway to the shopping centre. There'd always be homeless people sleeping in there, and a desperate, dire busker. The floors had a rubber covering that stuck to your shoes because every liquid known to mankind had been spilt on it. There certainly wasn't any appreciation of brutalism in the 1980s and 90s. It was very much viewed as a mistake."

It wasn't always the case, though. Settling outside the cafe, I cite that great sociological case study, the 1976 film version of the classic sitcom, 'The Likely Lads'. It perfectly encapsulates, I suggest, a seismic class difference when it comes to northern views of modernist salvation.

In one scene, Bob Ferris and Terry Collier stand amid the freshly razed rubble of their terraced childhood homes. For the upwardly mobile and bouffantly quiffed Bob, already living in the middle-class suburbs, the high-rise apartments emerging from these ruins are "soulless concrete blocks". For the resolutely working-class Terry, the redevelopment can't come soon enough. Here is a man justifiably tired of "padding down the yard to a freezing outside bog".

"Yes, I do think there was a lot of that feeling," agrees Chapman-Fox. "People wanted to move forward. The Runcorn New Town master plan was devised by Arthur Ling, who was vice-president of the Royal Institute of British Architects and a committed communist. Not just a socialist – a member of the Communist Party. He very much saw Runcorn New Town as a way of improving the lives of ordinary people."

Did Thatcherism eventually scupper these developments, then? I have detected a sliver of anger running through the Warrington-Runcorn albums. Bitterness at these ideals of northern working-class redemption being failed by the incoming Tory administration. Chapman-Fox is nodding in agreement as a waitress in a black tabard brings us a piping hot pot of tea.

"Managed decline was a definite policy and will feed into the themes of the next album," he says. "We've had wave after wave of 'Northern Powerhouse' and 'Levelling Up' campaigns – they're all hot air and empty promises. So where the third album is alone and adrift, there's a lot of anger in the fourth. The treatment of the provinces and the North in particular. That's the whole debate, really – did the new towns fail or were they failed? And in a lot of cases, I think it's the latter, through lack of investment.

"But I try to convey hope and despair simultaneously. And I do love brutalism as a style. In the 1980s, we suddenly got housing estates that looked like the Dursleys' house in the Harry Potter books, trying to be rustic villages.

"The 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher feels like a turning point where we stopped looking forward and actually started looking backwards. Poundbury, built by the now-King Charles on the outskirts of Dorchester, is horrendous – very much a new town estate designed to look like Georgian architecture. There's even a town square with a bandstand. It just makes me think of 'Trumpton'."

So what about the upbringing of the teeny Gordon Chapman-Fox? Mum was a primary school teacher with copies of the 'Come And Praise' hymn book piled on the piano stool, but it was his electrical engineer dad who provided a more profound musical education.

"He had a colossal record collection," recalls Chapman-Fox. "All the original Beatles releases until 'Magical Mystery Tour', when I think things got a bit too weird for him. But hearing 'Sgt Pepper' as a five-year-old created such vivid pictures in my head. He had a huge classical collection too, which included 'Switched-On Bach' by Wendy Carlos. And also, crucially, he had 'Oxygène' and 'Equinoxe' by Jean-Michel Jarre. So I would put those on, get out my 'Star Wars' figures and have the greatest fun.

"The electronic music from TV programmes like 'The Great Egg Race' and 'Chock-A-Block' would be filtered in too. And anything that the BBC Radiophonic Workshop was doing on 'Doctor Who'. It all percolated through into my consciousness."

Wasn't that music born from similarly altruistic ambitions as the new town projects? It's a conceptual leap, but go with me on this. The BBC, publicly funded and with a remit unbound by commerce, deciding it would be healthy to give ordinary kids a blast of the avant-garde – experimental electronic noise, tape loops and the humming of wave oscillators – on your telly every Saturday teatime?

"Yeah," he laughs. "And, of course, they were only paying for one guy in a cupboard, which is far cheaper than an orchestra. That was the whole idea behind the synth sounds on the Warrington-Runcorn albums. If a local authority was producing a promotional film about their proposed new town development, they'd get one bloke with three synths and a four-track machine and say, 'Make us some music'."

His first synth, he reveals, was bought in the 1990s and employed in a somewhat unlikely musical setting.

"I was with a band called Narcosis, putting samples and noises into grindcore!" he laughs. "But really, I got into electronic music around 2000 when a mate brought me a dodgy copy of a piece of software called Reason. And part of the appeal came from me being a control freak. I love being in a band and bouncing ideas off each other, but sometimes I'd say, 'This song should do *this*!', and no one else would agree."

Further alarming forays into grindcore were made during a stint as bassist with Lancashire noiseniks Mechagodzilla. There are recordings on YouTube that sound like angry elephants being pushed down flights of stairs. Chapman-Fox also bashfully admits to having made a modest amount of commercial music for local TV adverts. Which ones? He's reluctant to say, but I prod him with the milk jug until he relents.

"There's a caravan site over the hill there," he says, vaguely wafting an arm in the direction of Carnforth. "Holgates Holiday Parks. I've done them."

Everything about Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan feels perfectly formed, the result of Chapman-Fox's own visionary ambitions for his music. The immaculate blocks of analogue, the council-issue synths and the self-designed album artwork, redolent of local authority pamphlets stuffed into revolving display racks in pebble-dashed libraries.

Live, he is accompanied by projections of smoke-filled local council meetings – Arthur Ling with his trimmed moustache and the blocky text of ancient Granada TV adverts. Tellingly, Chapman-Fox's day job is designing graphics for the marketing department of Lancaster University, three miles up the A6 on a sprawling, modernist campus.

"The fact that I work at the university goes into the whole brutalism mix," he nods. "It's not full-on concrete, but it's still very 1960s. It's almost a new town in itself."

So was the whole Warrington-Runcorn project sparked by his frustration at his previous lack of musical success? He blithely claims his earlier solo electronic incarnations – Heskin Radiophonic and Dublock – never sold more than 30 copies of any release. Was 'Interim Report, March 1979' a deliberately contrary "Fuck you"? A project so achingly specialist that it surely wouldn't sell at all… but which, in accordance with the bizarre laws of the universe, actually did?

"Definitely," he smiles. "I make the music for a principal audience of me. Which may be egotistical, but if you're not happy with your own music, why would anyone else like it? The whole theme of the Warrington-Runcorn New Town Development Plan is exceptionally niche, so much so that I've possibly painted myself into a corner."

Still, the success has been a blast. There are at least two more Warrington-Runcorn albums in the pipeline and a further LP under his own name. This summer, he played to a packed-out tent at the End Of The Road festival in Dorset's Larmer Tree Gardens. The Financial Times described the performance, with appropriately minimalist brevity, as "one middle-aged man and his electronics set-up".

He laughs self-effacingly at the review.

"Part of me is still in a daze," he admits. "To have played to 1,000 people… it was amazing. I felt as confounded as I did when the first pressing of 'Interim Report, March 1979' sold out in minutes. It was intimidating, so much bigger than anything I'd ever done before, and I think I looked up twice. During the first break in my set, I went over to the microphone to introduce myself, but I stumbled, nearly fell over, and just went, 'Ta!' Then I spent the next 10 minutes thinking, 'You utter tit…'."

And with that, we drain the last of the tea and wander back down the hill. Just as in Middle-earth, the road leads ever on and on. Not to Rivendell and Mordor, but to Dalton Square and the White Cross pub, and the musical dreams of a very Lancastrian utopia.

'Districts, Roads, Open Space' is out now on Castles In Space

DIVINE RICE

Producer Halina Rice creates immersive, audiovisual environments where music, art and technology intersect. Her second long-player, ‘Elision’, takes you on a deep journey into abstract soundscapes

WORDS: MAT SMITH

Sitting at home in Tufnell Park, north London, audiovisual artist Halina Rice taps a biro against her lips and looks pensively at the screen. Rice, who has recently released her ‘Elision’ album on the eclectic Injazero label, is contemplating the specific, almost indefinable quality she is principally motivated by.

“If you go to an art gallery or an installation, or you’re in the presence of an amazing sunrise or sunset for a fragment of time, you’re lifted out of your concerns and the daily grind,” she says. “You can be somewhere else. You could say that means running away, but it’s not. It’s like a better appreciation of things. And rather than try and solve problems straight on, you take yourself away and experience a wider perspective.”

The interactions and effects she describes are somewhere between immersive – a word she frequently uses about her music – and escapist.

“It’s so hard to find a word with the right connotations,” she admits, thoughtfully. “Escapism suggests that you’re running away from something, while spirituality suggests something that’s too religious. It’s like you want to use the word ‘transcendence’ – but transcendence sounds a bit grand.”

We find ourselves googling German words that might adequately describe the feeling she wants to bring to her music, and eventually concoct “Kurzzeitschön”, which roughly translates as “short-term beautiful”.

For Rice, a graduate of London’s Point Blank Music School, this is more than mere idle wordplay. This is a serious, important, definitional concept that motivates her work in synthesising sound and video, whether onstage, in a gallery or in imagined VR worlds.

And it directly influenced her exacting, detailed approach to making the textures and beats comprising ‘Elision’.

Halina Rice's journey to 'Elision' began with a series of four singles she self-released in 2020 and 2021. 'Spheres', 'Terrain', 'Breaks' and 'Sunken Suns' were short, urgent slabs of adventurous, untried sonics, symbiotically blended with qualities more commonly associated with electronic dance music. 'Spheres' switches back and forth between passages of shimmering ambience, savagely edited euphoric vocals and a suppressed rhythm that feels like it's borrowed from a rave mixtape, while 'Terrain' occupies a deep, trancey space.

"It was 'Terrain' that really took off for me," says Rice. "I suddenly had 23,000 monthly listeners on Spotify and Danny Rampling asking if he could include the track in a playlist. At that point, I was hitting a stride of writing something a bit like IDM, and it was even recognised by some as progressive house or Ibizan trance.

"And I was thinking, 'Well, I've never actually been to Ibiza', but it was lovely. My friends think it's funny because I never go clubbing. I'm literally the person least likely to make a dance record."

'Terrain' was followed by 'Breaks', structured with layers of razor-sharp beats, face-melting guitar riffs and serene clouds of elegiac synths. 'Sunken Suns' was unpredictable, restless and yet also stately.

"It was deemed 'chaos-step'," laughs Rice with a slightly confused expression. "It's like a weird sort of dubstep that's all over the place. I'm quite comfortable writing across different genres, but I've always questioned, 'Should I be worried about that?'. And I don't think so. I don't think I can care too much. You just see where things go."

All four singles, insistent and arresting on first listen, are full of intricate details in the liminal spaces hidden between the seams. They make for a very different proposition to the Rice who appeared in 2017, fresh from Point Blank, with the celebrated vocal album 'Redux'. The contrast, and the vast chasm existing between 'Redux' and 'Spheres', suggest that anyone who thought they had her sound pinned down was mistaken.

"I'd always only meant to be a non-vocal artist," she explains. "I'm glad I did 'Redux' because it meant I got to explore that avenue, but it wasn't the right one for me."

Aside from those four formative standalone tracks, it was her tentative foray into performing live that directly led to 'Elision'.

"I started playing live shows at the end of 2021," she says. "I wanted to take my stuff out live as I think that's where it really works. I played in March this year at Iklectik near Waterloo, which I absolutely love. They platform incredible people every day of the week."

Crucially, Siné Buyuka, founder of Injazero Records, was at the Iklectik gig.

"I didn't know she was there," admits Rice. "She reached out to me very sweetly afterwards. I'd only played live maybe three times and nobody knew me, so it was lovely for her to approach me.

"I was impressed with her catalogue and ethos, and the fact that she's got a real kind of openness. Injazero is an extremely ambient label, but I was a bit more beat-driven. She was like, 'Yeah, I do want to take the label a bit more in that direction'. I appreciate the fact she liked the mixed bag of things I do. She trusts you to do whatever you like. She's a really inspirational lady."

Buyuka suggested Injazero release her next single. Instead, Rice gave them a whole album.

We use elisions every day. In linguistic terms, elision refers to the deliberate removal of letters to allow two words to be efficiently compressed. More generally, it means an absence or omission – the things that perhaps should be there but aren't.

As a framing device for Rice's album, it's hard to see this as an exercise in reductionism. Like the four singles preceding it, nine of the 10 tracks here are densely packed with beat-driven electronics – the exception being the haunting, ethereal and vaguely unsettling title cut.

"Part of the reason it's called 'Elision' is because it's all about aligning two things that maybe don't belong together," explains Rice.

"The process forms a sort of dissonance, I suppose. On the title track, the synths in the background are actually doing straightforward, quite classical chords. But there are vocal and synth sounds that feel partially aligned. There's a tool I use called Morph, where you literally put two samples in. It's not so simple that they're just bound together, but more that they take features from each other. With that specific sound, sometimes it's more of a voice, and sometimes it's more the voice taking on characteristics from the synthesiser.

"When I put it on the track with a little bit of synth underneath, it felt beautiful but still a bit messed up. It's not too sickly. There's noise and stuff that's not quite right in there. Sometimes the vocals don't land in the right place and it's a bit harsh. But I was pleased it balanced itself out. It's probably the sweetest thing I could write."

But picking titles is a tricky business, right?

"Sometimes I go through thesauruses looking for synonyms," says Rice. "You get lots of words and then you see something that catches your eye. 'Elision' resonated on lots of different levels, and it felt perfect for that track with that morphing sound. And when it came to naming the album, I was actually trying to look for a different title. But I kept coming back to that word and thinking, 'This is the best word ever for what I'm trying to do'."

'Elision' is a collection, of sorts. Three of its tracks were commissioned for the WITCIH (Women In Technology Creative Industries Hub) digital festival, and half of the pieces were ones she'd "tried and tested" in her live sets, entirely in keeping with her eclectic sound methodology.

In contrast to the ambient leanings of the title track, 'Helix' – the first single from 'Elision' – is a thunderous and hypnotic affair, while the unusual time signature of 'Momentum' feels upbeat yet strangely uncertain. 'Hunter', one of the shortest tracks on the album, consists solely of percussion sounds, at first seeming almost randomised until you realise each one has been carefully and deliberately placed.

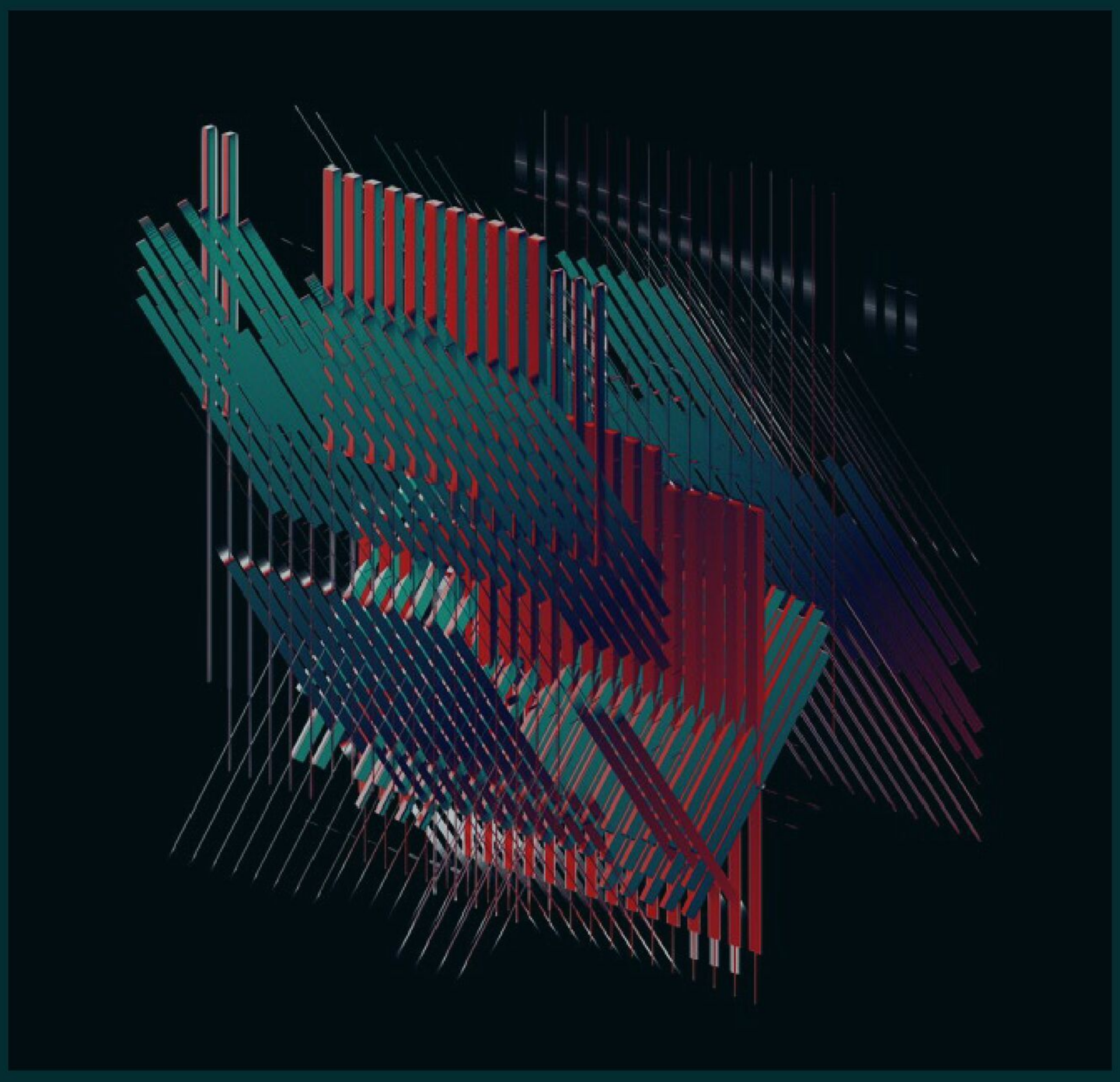
"I guess they represent me at my most experimental," says Rice. "I'm very inspired by people who do things that are off-grid like this, who are totally wild."

Again, it's those intentional micro-details – intricate, carefully crafted interstitial events – which mean 'Elision' can't be wholly considered electronic dance music. The opening track, 'Hey', is a case in point. It begins with levels of rippling texture, through which a vocal sample reveals itself.

"That track was me trying out granulators and LFOs," explains Rice. "I came up with this thing that sounded a little bit like an organic stringed instrument, even though it wasn't a string instrument when it went into the granulator. It had this mystical, pulsing rise and fall, which I liked. It felt organic, but it was also unplayable, so the two things kind of came together."

The distinctive vocal sound on 'Hey' was also the product of manipulation.

"I'm happy to experiment with samples of female or male vocals, and I use my own because, you know, they're there," says Rice. "I pass them through a tool called PaulStretch – it has an algorithm which makes any vocal source sound beautiful because it's stretching it maybe 10 or 20 times. You start to hear the dissonance within the vocals. I absolutely love that."



‘Hey’ had a life before ‘Elision’. Some of its opening sounds were recycled from a piece of music that Rice originally wrote for ‘New Worlds’, a virtual reality project by Zaha Hadid Architects and L-Acoustics Creations, which was installed in the DDP Cultural Centre in Seoul earlier this year.

“Their exhibition was about where things are going in terms of how we live and what the future will look like,” explains Rice. “They created a totally VR design environment where people sit on a bench and put on headphones and headsets. I created an immersive binaural mix to accompany it. So rather than just being on a bench, you’re suddenly in a place with floating spheres. I think there’s an otherworldliness about the stuff I do, so it worked well for that project.”

Her soundscape work, alongside her interest in live performance, signifies Rice’s intention not to be pigeonholed.

“I want to be modular,” she says. “I can be audio-only, or I can be audio and visual. Or audio, visual and a whole immersive performance. The music is the most important thing, and the other stuff is like the window dressing surrounding it – it’s there to enhance the whole experience when you’re performing.”

Rice is part of a frontier movement of like-minded artists who twist, transform and manipulate the hallmarks of electronic dance music and visual accompaniments into exciting new shapes. Progressive, experimental and composer-like in style, the results wilfully defy easy categorisation, yet are sympathetic to expected norms.

Rice and I were both at the same Iklectik gig in May featuring a work by Simon Fisher Turner. It was accompanied by a slide show of London photographs by Sebastian Sharples, many of which were taken during lockdown when the streets were deserted and entire office buildings stood silent, empty and pointless.

“I was struck by an unexpectedly beautiful quality in those photos,” reflects Rice. “I couldn’t nail down precisely what it was. It was so simple, yet so perfect. People are always trying to analyse what is ‘beautiful’. They use the golden ratio. There must be something very pleasing about perspective, but it was the colour gradings of those images I liked. They were all quite pale. It was the soul of what the photographer was seeing.

“It felt a bit like my music. I create a space that encourages the audience to exist somewhere a little bit unusual.”

‘Elision’ is out now on Injazero

UMMING AND AHHING

A self-proclaimed “uber-group/circus troupe”, London quartet The Umlauts dabble in wonky minimal synths, art-punk and industrial vibes. Thrillingly visceral it all is too, as their ‘Another Fact’ EP vividly attests

WORDS: JEREMY ALLEN

The leafy residential suburb of Wimbledon in south-west London is not generally known as a hotbed of subversion. True, Wimbledon School of Art graduate Pauline Boty, aka “the Wimbledon Bardot”, did go on to co-found the British pop art movement in the early 1960s, but otherwise, you’re left scratching your head… The Wombles? The birthplace of Oliver Reed? John McEnroe’s headband?

But wait. Also formed in Wimbledon, at the very same art school that Boty attended – but now called Wimbledon College of Arts – are a new breed of malcontents.

Calling themselves The Umlauts, they’re a fierce and fabulous trans-European collective, making stern, new wave/techno-inspired sounds peppered with German, French, Italian and English Sprechgesang. Their retro coldwave harks back to synthpop’s golden age while sounding startlingly new. And they are startlingly new themselves.
It was only in June 2021 that the band released their first six-track EP, ‘Ü’, which included future classics ‘Boiler Suits & Combat Boots’ and ‘Energy Plan’. Up to that point, they’d been more concept than band, a joke that got out of hand.

"Yeah, I think it bloomed when we realised we liked writing together," says co-founder Oliver Offord, speaking via video call from his home in Lewisham, south-east London, which he shares with Alfred Lear, his fellow Umlauts co-founder and school friend from Stroud in Gloucestershire. During our conversation, Offord is stationary and loquacious, while Lear is smiley, moves around a lot and says little.

"We started out as a tongue-in-cheek attempt at doing some kind of electronic music," says Offord. "But it became clear quite quickly that our collaboration was working well musically, and it just carried on from there."

Enter Annabelle Mödlinger and Maria Vittoria Faldini – Anglo-Austrian and Franco-Italian, respectively – who bring in vocals in four different European languages. As singers who frequently switch between tongues, often mid-song, they somehow find themselves sailing against the prevailing political winds of the country they've chosen to call home.

"I met Olly very early on the [Fine Art] course," recalls Mödlinger. "It was quite funny actually, because somebody said to me, 'Oh, you never stay friends with the first people you meet at college', but I definitely stuck with those people."

"We hated each other at first," laughs Faldini, referring to Mödlinger. "I was very loud, and Annabelle was on her period, and she was really, really hating me."

Somehow the pair got past their initial reservations and bonded, with Faldini joining as co-vocalist not long after Mödlinger had been drafted in to sing 'Boiler Suits & Combat Boots'.

Initially asked to bring lyrics to Offord and Lear's student digs one night after work, Mödlinger scribbled the words on napkins in between serving drinks at a cocktail bar.

"I can remember finishing my shift and going over to their place afterwards, so it must have been two or three in the morning," she says. "I'd written down the lyrics that evening. I still have the notes – they're completely illegible."

She came, she spat and she conquered over some vintage Korg MS-20-driven bars. It was only supposed to be a lark at first – a gentle and satirical take on icy Germanic pop, with the title already decided – but what they got instead was proper alchemy. Still, nobody expected it to actually take off.

"We listened to loads of the same music, but I think going into the music world was never a consideration because we were studying fine art," admits Mödlinger. "And then one evening we recorded 'Boiler Suits & Combat Boots'. The guys did the music beforehand, which we found really cool, and yeah… it just happened."

After that, they were quickly signed to PRAH Recordings, which has put out music by cellist Oliver Coates, Haiku Salut and others. Then came the follow-up single, 'Energy Plan', which proved 'Boiler Suits' had been no fluke. With a video of Mödlinger's head being cooked in a microwave and then served up on a plate of bratwurst, it features the spookily prescient line, "Energy plan for the Western man", on repeat.

The original 'Energy Plan' came out in June 2021 and was remixed later that year by Orbury Common, the hauntology duo comprising Emlyn Bainbridge and Josh Day-Jones, who was friends with both Offord and Lear when they lived back home in Stroud.

"We put it out very early," says Lear. "We should have released it a bit later."

"It's Liz Truss' plan now," demurs Offord (although, given the rapidly changing political landscape, it's obviously no longer hers, either).

If the start was audacious, then the future looks no less thrilling. The Umlauts went down so brilliantly at last year's End Of The Road festival – at Dorset's Larmer Tree Gardens – that they were invited back this year, and are now working on their first album.

"It's been a bit slow, especially over the summer with doing so many shows," admits Offord. "But we're getting back into it now. Winter is the best time to write stuff, I find. You've got to keep warm by doing something."

While we wait for the album – expected in 2023 – there's the not-inconsiderable new EP, 'Another Fact', to ponder. Featuring six progressive tracks that take the listener on a bohemian journey through the lives and loves of Mödlinger and Faldini, the meaning is often obscured if you don't happen to speak any of the languages of western Europe. Opening with a recording of an organ being tuned in Ghent Cathedral, it bursts into the erogenous 'The Quickening'. So what's the story?

"I'd gone to Ghent with my dad, who really likes cycling," says Offord. "So while he went off for a bike ride around Flanders, I was left to my own devices, wandering around the city for the day.

"I made that recording for the 'The Quickening' on my phone and added it to the other music, which had sounded a bit shit up to then, to be honest. But when I put the organ over it, it became so much stranger and notes fell in weird places."

'Another Fact' acts as something of a palate-cleanser after The Umlauts' last EP, introducing a host of new sounds.

"Most of them are happy accidents," admits Offord. "Sometimes you try stuff out and it works."

Experimental or not, 'Another Fact' finds the band sounding much bolder and more confident. Take the blistering 'Non É Ancora', bolstered by a romantic ode to Italian punks CCCP Fedeli Alla Linea, or the sweet, wonky pop perfection of 'Sweat'. The sound has been augmented throughout with the excellent violin work of Magdalena McLean, whose frenetic bowing takes these tracks to new cinematic heights.

"There were some things we were doing on the first record, on tracks like 'Remedy Song', that had quite an orchestral feel to them," says Offord. "So when we started putting together the live band it made a lot of sense to have Magda play those violin sections, even though on that recording there isn't any real violin – it's all synthesiser. And then, through playing live, it became apparent that we needed violin sections on the next record."

McLean isn't available for the interview, but there are other Umlauts who grace our chat. The band has grown from a four-piece to a nine-piece for live shows, with members who have become increasingly involved with the whole process. There's drummer and beat programmer Toby Kempner, for instance, a friend from Stroud who is now a full-time Umlaut.

"When we were younger, we would write songs together every Saturday because when you're a teenager you've got a hell of a lot of time," remembers Kempner.

"But this is totally different because the songs are written by the four-piece, and then there's the challenge of arranging the live band with lots of electronic and textural elements. So you think, 'How can we express those on the instruments we've got in the room?'. The violin can take melodic lines, but it's also used rhythmically, while with the acoustic drums, you lose the timbre of the drum machine, but you gain all the expression your body can put into the acoustic instrument."

Also on the line is Freya Tate, their live show percussionist, and yet another member of the Stroud mafia.

"I latched onto them as being interesting, creative people when we worked at the same arts centre, the Stroud Valleys Artspace," says Tate. "But I used to see them walking around town as 14-year-olds in their drainpipe trousers."

The title track from 'Another Fact' is a pulsing, caterwauling anthem of decadence that benefits from added percussion, while the accompanying video is a riot of oddness. Paul, the freaky dancer who gyrates through the streets of south London, approached the band one evening in the hope of becoming The Umlauts' very own Bez.

"He came up to Annabelle at a show and asked if he could dance at a festival with us," says Offord. "And we said, 'No, you can't do that, but you can do a video instead'."

"It's a long song to dance to all the way through," adds Kempner. "The man's got stamina."

Although the group have worked with decent cinematographers, they've just failed spectacularly in trying to make their own video with camera phones.

"That definitely won't be coming out anytime soon," chuckles Faldini.

Thankfully, Faldini and Mödlinger have other discernable talents to bring to The Umlauts' table. On the new EP, a righteous and raucous melange of vernaculars often front up to each other, as in the angry French and German of 'Frightened'. It's a mixture that Mödlinger says can become "really explosive, really quickly".

Faldini reveals that she's tried to write aggressively in Italian but it doesn't work for her, so she finds herself reverting to French instead. It's somewhat odd that it should seem political to be using different languages, but here we are.

"Yes, it does tend to become political," nods Mödlinger. "It almost feels like it's becoming fetishised in a way, but I think it's a personal choice that we make in using lyrics that we both feel comfortable with."

Faldini agrees. "I can imagine how, from the outside, it might appear very thought through and planned. But, to be honest, it's about doing what feels natural and comfortable within a certain song. It makes me feel close to my roots to sing in Italian and French."

I tell them that before The Umlauts, the only German rap I had listened to was Falco (he of 'Rock Me Amadeus' fame) , but I'm now finding myself enjoying Romano and Shirin David.

"As a kid, I grew up with loads of German rap, and I actually hate it," laughs Mödlinger. "My brother loves it, but whenever he puts it on at a party or something, I'll be the first person to switch it off. The intonation in German rap is quite different to what I do.

"When we were in Switzerland, I had a very interesting conversation with a guy who said what I do is German but I kind of do it with an English intonation. He was like, 'I haven't heard German lyric-writing like that before'."

"It's funny you mention Falco," adds Faldini. "Last summer, I was at someone's house in Austria and I randomly met Falco's keyboard player. We just spoke about music and he ended up hearing the tracks from the new EP before they were released – he'd asked me for a little preview, so I sent them to him. We said we'd keep in touch, and he was like, 'Oh, if I'm ever in London, it would be nice to go out'. Never heard from him again."

'Another Fact' is out now on Moshi Moshi

SPACE ODYSSEY

PLAID

Feorm Falorx

WARP

Plaid have been a firm fixture of left-field electronic music in the UK for over 30 years. Breaking through in 1991 as part of the Black Dog collective with the album 'Mbuki Mvuki', the duo of Ed Handley and Andy Turner have since balanced an often playful, sometimes mystic melodiousness with futurist sound design and xenomorphic rhythms. Though Plaid are considered pioneers of the genre variously tagged as IDM, braindance or armchair rave, they've consistently evaded precise categorisation. They've made dance music – their 'Scoobs In Columbia' track remains a breakbeat-driven, piano-laced club classic – but much of their output has been built for home listening, and is threaded with an optimistic musicality often absent in the dystopian soundscapes of other electronic acts.

Working with AI, robots, percussion groups and orchestras over their lengthy career, as well as making soundtracks for video games and films, they've never settled into complacency, instead maintaining a curiosity and fascination with the new. It's this sense of difference – and their obsession with the possibilities of technology – that doubtless led to them working with Björk on 1997's 'Not For Threes' album, and on several groundbreaking remixes for her.

Plaid's last record, 2019's 'Polymer', was inspired by the interactions of humans and machines, and how it's possible to co-exist harmoniously with technology, rather than viewing it as a destructive force.

"We feel that machines are as much a part of nature as an ant hill or a bird's nest," said Andy Turner at the time of its release. "Perhaps the fact we see the things we've made as separated from nature is a problem. There's no reason we can't build sustainably, and in harmony with existing nature."

Though a similarly benevolent view of machines persists on their new album, 'Feorm Falorx', the inspiration this time comes from science fiction. The music here, apparently, was first performed at the Feorm Festival, an "intergalactic shindig" on the planet Falorx, and it's suitably extraterrestrial.

While the opening track, 'Perspex', begins as a delicate contemplation of plangent bell notes and synth sweeps, it morphs into a rapid shimmer of outlandish, harp-like melodies. 'Modenet' steps tentatively towards the alien dancefloor, with a long, bittersweet bassline, squelching synth harmonies and a rhythm approaching disco. 'Wondergan' makes that disco connection even more explicit – a bright and colourful trip through light-hearted, effervescent electronics, driven by flying hi-hats and a relentless beat. You can imagine the alien flora dotted around the fictional festival site waving in time to it, and you can also hear traces of DMX Krew or Luke Vibert at their most jovial.

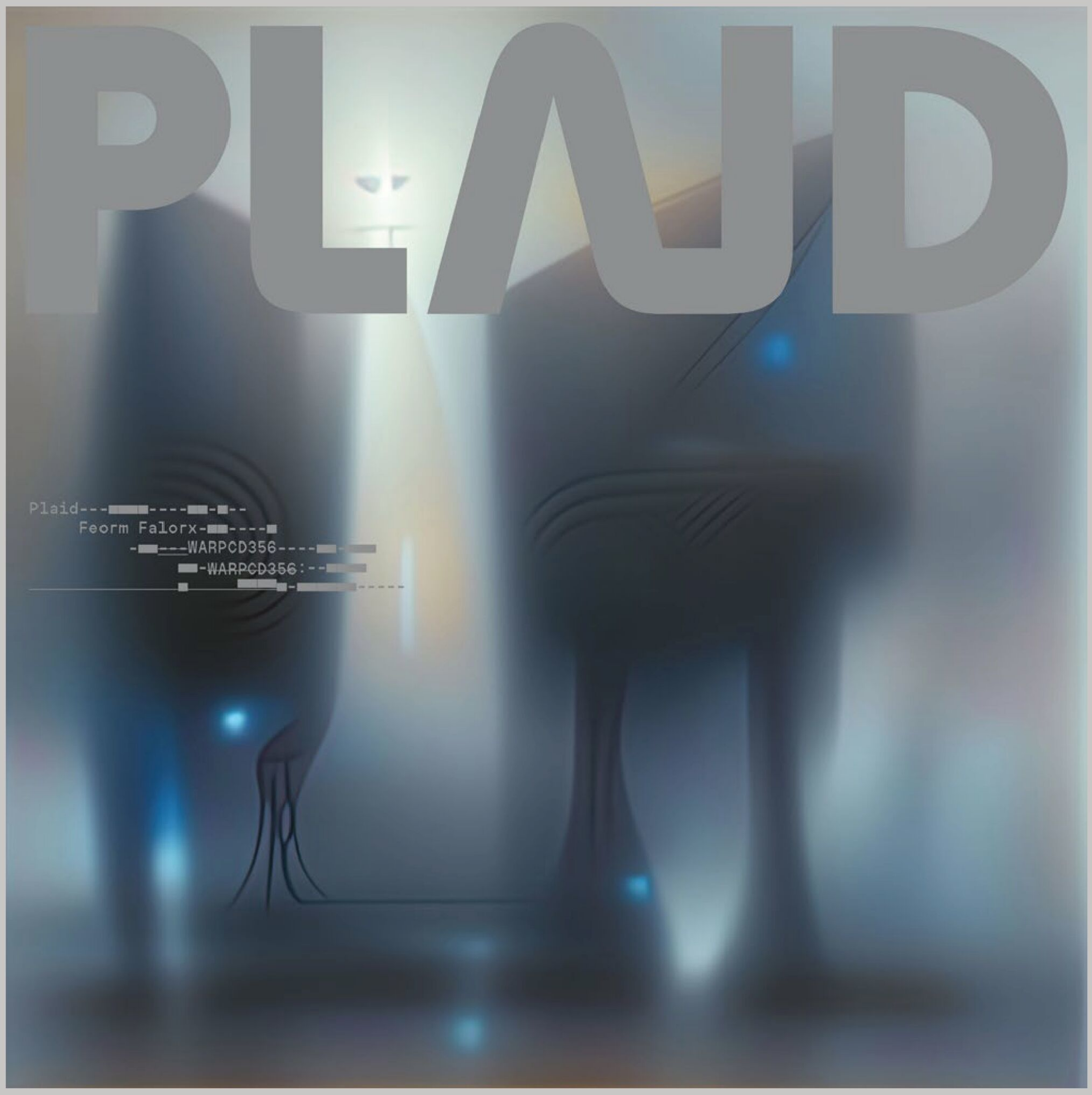
'C A' sounds far stranger, its metallic, offbeat clunks gradually building in layers like some off-world superstructure, and 'Cwtchr' is a melancholic gem augmented by sparkling digital tones. But on 'Nightcrawler', featuring long-term co-writer Mason Bee, Plaid head in an entirely different direction. Mixing a skippy drum 'n' bass beat with gloriously gloomy post-rock guitar, they sound like prime Mogwai or Bark Psychosis. Traces of wordless vocals permeate the miasma of darkness, adding to the all-enveloping atmosphere. It's a sound that suits them spectacularly well.

The brooding 'Bowl' revolves around a synthetic piano sequence and a glowering sub-bassline, while electronic shards punctuate the cavernous space above. 'Return To Return' is maybe the weirdest-sounding piece of the lot, with its oddball, ascending riff and skittering tintinnabulations. On 'Tomason', unconventional chords bounce around a shimmering hall of mirrors, with a beat that could almost be Jamaican dancehall put through an effects mangle. Lastly, on 'Wide I's', they close on an eerie unresolved note, where mechanical drones refract and reflect against speedy synth sequences, evoking some kind of cybernetic Feorm ritual.

When you're aware of the concept behind the record, it's incredibly evocative, and the cover art – generated by image synthesis and OpenAI's DALL·E program, which creates realistic images and art from a description in natural language – furthers the sense of immersion. This sci-fi theme will apparently be expanded via music videos and a graphic novel. It's a powerful piece of work, at times fun, at others contemplative or emotive.

While some of their electronica peers have opted to return to the same themes and sounds again and again, Plaid have constantly sought fresh new ways to express themselves, avoiding any notion of the nostalgia trap. Most importantly, Handley and Turner's musical futurism is one with warmth, humanity and a palpable depth of feeling. Eleven albums into their career, Plaid are still making vital records, and 'Feorm Falorx' is an excellent reminder of their craft.

BEN MURPHY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LOULA YORKE - PHOTO: ROSS HARRISON

LOULA YORKE

Florescence

BANDCAMP

Imagine you're in Suffolk on a spring day, gazing at a wildflower meadow outside your window. This is the inspiration for Oram Award-winning artist Loula Yorke's fourth solo album, and while the setting conjures a slow-moving bucolic idyll, her intricate modular arrangements are punchy, urgent reflections on time and the circular rhythms of nature. Yorke makes the combination of birdsong on 'Milk Thistle', the glitchy electronics of 'Bastard Toadflax' and the cosmic bleeps of 'Honeysuckle' feel like the most natural thing in the world. Proper flower power. **CF**

AMI DANG

The Living World's Demands

LEAVING/PHANTOM LIMB

Amrita "Ami" Kaur Dang is a Punjabi-American sitarist and ambient composer from Baltimore, who has been blending ethereal electronica with Indian classical music since 2011's 'Hukam'. Her fourth studio album, 'The Living World's Demands', builds on her reputation for creating dreamy, cathartic works. Focusing on survival and resistance, Dang's songs of empowerment are sung in both English and Punjabi. 'A Muted Crime' addresses domestic violence, and 'Sensations' explores the mental chaos that stems from living online. Evocative and euphoric, just switch everything off and tune in. **JA**

NICOLAS BOUGAÏEFF

Begin Within

MUTE

How do you challenge yourself when you have a decade's experience in recording music? For Nicolas Bougaïeff's second long-player on Mute, he uses his voice for the first time – on every track. The Quebec-born, Berlin-based polymath's vocal becomes just one more ingredient to manipulate – singing, stretching, chopping and distorting. The results are by turns glitchy ('We Rejoice'), oppressively ambient ('Inside Out') and experimentally pop ('Naked Eye'), dynamically articulating the idea of "transformation". It makes for an album that's bold, playful and utterly compelling. **AT**

ERNEST HOOD

Back To The Woodlands

FREEDOM TO SPEND

Rendered paraplegic by polio in his 20s, ambient pioneer Ernest Hood switched from guitar to less physically demanding instruments. Written and recorded between 1972 and 1982 in Portland, Oregon, this "nearly lost" album combines field recordings with synths and zithers. 'Noonday Yellows' fuses hypnagogic melodics and sampled chirrups, recalling the work of contemporary experimentalists such as Spencer Clark. Hood also elicits the warm earthiness of flute and harp here and there, imbuing 'Back To The Woodlands' with a fetching new-age-ish radiance. **ST**

SEAHAWKS
Infinite Echo
CASCINE

Cosmic voyagers Jon Tye (Lo Recordings) and Welsh artist Pete Fowler have consistently hit the sweet spot over the last decade with their Seahawks project. Channelling the healing force of new age mysticism into chilled Balearic vibrations and lysergic astral dub, this latest beauty feels like paradise. Billed as "anti-dystopian", 'Infinite Echo' abounds with reassuring warmth and beatitude. Soaring tracks like 'Beams Of Love' and 'Space Oracle' are so potent, you're left feeling charged with pure trippy energy. Fabulous. **CG**

UN.PROCEDURE
un.procedure
BANDCAMP

You can't move for British electronic/jazz trios at present, but Birmingham's un.procedure are a bit special. While many of these groups favour a spiritual, cosmic sound, un.procedure are harder and darker, almost industrial in places. 'Polytunnel' is particularly impressive, its brittle pulse, rising drone and funereal sax gradually building towards an exultant, stratospheric wail. 'Fall And Flatten' rumbles with thrumming intensity, while the rejoinder to 'You Stepped Into A Hole' has to be "and fell into a pit of burning metal". Thoroughly excellent skronk. **JB**

BURD ELLEN
A Tarot Of The Green Wood
MAVIS RECORDINGS

Playing their mystical cards right, Glaswegians Debbie Armour and Gayle Brogan shuffle a deck of largely traditional songs into a stirring homage to the Major Arcana tarot. Armour adds limpid vocals to Brogan's alarming folktronic soundscapes, the combination epitomised by the extraordinary 13-minute track 'Under No Enchantment (The Star & The Moon)'. "First thing she gave me / Two sprays of old Dog's Mercury," sings Armour. This winsomely poisonous woodland perennial is the ideal metaphor for an album of evergreen beauty entwined with dark terror. **BF**

MAASTRICHT RESEARCH
Idle Animation
HOBBES MUSIC

The name Maastricht Research is a feint – 'Idle Animation' sounds more like radio dispatches from the Oort cloud rather than the city on the Dutch/Belgian border. The culprit, Scottish artist Jonathan Hunter, has collated emotive ambient and drone music here, made while living in Amsterdam, Glasgow and Berlin. Textural and enigmatic, shuddering synth atmospherics course through opener 'An Makar', while subtle animated thrums and the occasional vocal sample, as on the rousing 'Winter Lanterns', induce a welcome cosmic tranquillity. **FH**

SHABASON & KRGOVICH
At Scaramouche
IDÉE FIXE

Unwinding amid the faux glamour of their favourite Toronto eatery, Joseph Shabason and Nicholas Krgovich conceived this opulent homage to their surroundings as a gentle riot of jazzy easy listening. "When it's dark before supper, and the rain falls on the house / Happy for no reason," croons Krgovich on the misty-eyed starter, 'Soil'. 'What Comes Back' is an autumnal aperitif of woozy minor keys, 'I Am So Happy With My Little Dog' a main course of sumptuous synthpop. An immersive, quiet night out of an album, with a wistful walk home. **BF**

BIBIO
BIB10
WARP

Stephen Wilkinson marks his landmark 10th album with what he's calling his "ode to the guitar" – there's even a close-up of a fretboard on the sleeve, just to emphasise the fact. Here be guitar licks to suit all tastes – clipped and funky on slick 1980s pastiche 'S O L' and breezily jazzy on 'Cinnamon Cinematic', while pretty acoustics adorn 'Phonograph'. Wilkinson's music can often be suffocatingly nice, but here it swings and bops around, wearing its insouciant cool like a perfectly draped scarf. **WS**

FROM OVERSEAS & CITY OF DAWN
Misty Memories
PAST INSIDE THE PRESENT

Réunion Island native Kévin Séry (From Overseas) and Texas-based Damien Duque (City Of Dawn) join forces for eight tracks of what certainly qualifies as drone, due to the pair's love of a lengthy and sustained one-note glide. But rather than abrasive repetition, the likes of 'Silent Friends', 'Weathering' and the title track all float with a heavenly grace, heads very much in the ether. Occasionally, a lilting guitar or lonely piano note becomes apparent, but mainly this is all about the billowing clouds of gorgeous echo Séry and Duque leave in their wake. **BW**

NUEEN
Diagrams Of Thought
BALMAT

Nueen is Spanish producer Nacho Pezzati, and 'Diagrams Of Thought' follows the moonlit tension of his 'Dusting Intersection' EP, released earlier this year. These pieces are less oppressive and dense than their predecessor, opting for delicate uncertainty rather than bold disquiet, as the pristine synths of 'To Eve' drift into the low-key cinematic electronics of 'Lev', like a journey through late-night, neon skylines. Pezzati has always explored such contempary soundscapes, and tracks such as 'Veta' and 'Maxima' deliver a post-Warp futurism that's both subtle and compelling. **ST**

ASHER LEVITAS

I'm Not Smiling

LINE EXPLORATIONS

"Melancholy pop songs, imaginary marshland ambience… toad calls". Asher Levitas has quite literally led us down the garden path on his third solo album, 'I'm Not Smiling', and traded in the edgy soundscapes of his Old Apparatus guise for a phantasmic collection of synth improvisations recorded in Epping Forest. Wonderfully weird instrumentals recall Dieter Moebius' solo experiments, interchanging nicely with moments where Levitas bares his soul and his vocal chords. 'We're Not Enemies' reveals the Londoner's plaintive voice to be as clear as a freshwater spring. My advice? Gulp this down. **ILS**

THE UMLAUTS

Another Fact

PRAH RECORDINGS

The second offering from this London art-pop quartet pulsates with more of the infectious and feverish energy that characterised last year's debut EP 'Ü'. Building on those frenetic post-punk sounds, 'Another Fact' experiments further with field recordings, drone and synthpop, all of which are interwoven with layers of lyrical dexterity that sophisticatedly demonstrate their pan-European roots and influences. Highlights include the robotic grooves of 'The Commuter' and the compellingly metallic title track, which bristles with intent. **CC**

RROXYMORE

Perpetual Now

SMALLTOWN SUPERSOUND

French-born, Berlin-based artist Hermione Frank (aka rRoxymore) has taken a Murcof pill. Where 2019's 'Face To Phase' embraced nocturnal electro, these four long-form tracks are way more esoteric. Micro-beats samba against strangled static, while ambient rave descends into a hazy mirage of Arabic mizmār. Not so much deconstructed club music as a trippy flashback of its memory. Lead single 'Fragmented Dreams' pits flagellating percussive techno against dubby, freewheeling half-step, via screes of portentous sub-Detroit chord drama – an engrossing listen. A perpetual wow. **FR**

YOSA PEIT

Phyton

FIRE

Initially released on Tax Free Records two years ago, this debut long-player from Berlin producer Yosa Peit gets a welcome reissue. Loosely imagining a soundscape for a Coen Brothers movie, Peit has chucked the sonic equivalent of a kitchen sink at 'Phyton', but rather than the clutter you might expect, it works a treat. Glitchy yet supple, the broken beats and warped abstractions – on 'Lin' and 'Palm Tree Antenna', especially – are wholly unpredictable yet deliciously odd, like an esoteric mashup of Björk, Aphex and Laurie Anderson. Yep, that good. **VI**

SVANEBORG KARDYB
Over Tage
GONDWANA

Inspired by “traditional Danish songs and hymns”, the third album from Nikolaj Svaneborg and Jonas Kardyb is a delightfully intimate affair, drawing on Scandanavian jazz, folk, subtle electronics and ambient minimalism. As the twinkly instrumental grooves unfurl, you find yourself wholly absorbed in Svaneborg’s nimble keys and Kardyb’s considered percussion, especially on the gorgeous shuffle of ‘Fragt’ and the beatific title track, which both feel like being wrapped in the softest of duvets. Fans of Portico Quartet, GoGo Penguin or Mammal Hands are in for a warming treat here. **VI**

BIENSÜRE
Biensüre
WEWANTSOUNDS

Kurdish disco outfit Biensüre have been bringing a glorious melange of Turkish psych and undulating, synth-driven pop to Marseille dancefloors for a while now, and they’re sure to reach wider audiences with this excellent self-titled debut album. Led by Hakan Toprak, a singer and musician who’s been living in the increasingly hip southern French city for a decade, Wewantsounds have uncovered an absolute gem here. In any just world, irresistible songs full of international flavour – such as ‘Eyvah Eyvah’ and ‘Güzel Mi’ – will become universal ones. **JA**

FENELLA
The Metallic Index
FIRE

The second long-player from this Jane Weaver-led trio, and a welcome return to the radiophonic, kosmische sounds of Weaver’s ‘The Silver Globe’ and ‘Modern Kosmology’ albums. A “metapsychic melodrama for multiple synthesists”, inspired by 1920s medium Stella Cranshaw, ‘The Metallic Index’ is a heady fix. ‘Pulsion (Nurse On Train)’ is a lovely mix of early Autechre and classic Tangerine Dream, ‘A Young Girl Of Medium Height’ overlays Durutti Column-ish guitars, and ‘Stellar In Spectra’ marries the Clangers to angular drum machinery. This is electronica as an enveloping tonal journey, chiming and pulsating with analogue life. **JB**

DIANE BARBÉ
A Conference Of Critters
FORMS OF MINUTIAE

Berlin exploratory sound artist Diane Barbé unveils a passport to Thailand’s rainforests with ‘A Conference Of Critters’, released on field recording/sonic art label, Forms Of Minutiae. But this is far more than a simple butterfly net, capturing sounds to house in sterile jars. Screeching, buzzing and teeming wildlife populate ‘Leeches In The Supersonic Hills’, while elsewhere clamouring apes, the glottal sound of geckos, chattering voices and Barbé’s own diction are given equal standing in this re-imagined, hyperreal sonic landscape. Welcome to the jungle. **FH**

KAYLA PAINTER - PHOTO: LAURA CROUCHLEY

KAYLA PAINTER

Infinite You

CASTLES IN SPACE

"We measure time and our experience on Earth in a particular way," says Kayla Painter. "But in space, none of those rules apply…". Back in August, the Bristol producer's science fiction obsession surfaced on her 'Planet 9' album. For this Castles In Space debut, she delves even further into the great void. As the dark beats and throbbing static of 'Broadcast From The Collapse' lead to the hymnal piano and wordless whispers of the title track, it's clear that Painter has found salvation in the cosmos. Beautiful, resonant, and appropriately timeless. **BF**

RURAL TAPES

Inner Space Music

SMUGGLER MUSIC

Like its self-titled 2021 predecessor, Arne Kjelsrud Mathisen's second album as Rural Tapes features guest spots from REM's Peter Buck and Scott McCaughey, but the Norwegian composer doesn't need reflected glory to truly shine. Reaching further back than the 1970s kosmische of his debut, to 60s composers such as John Barry and Joe Meek, moments like the lush orchestration of 'Waltz For The Living Dead' and the tropical-ish groove of 'Inner Space' make for a wonderfully woozy and captivating listening experience. **PC**

DAVE CLARKSON

A Pocket Guide To Dream Land: Faded Fairgrounds And Coastal Ghost Towns Of The British Isles

CAVENDISH HOUSE

After releases focused on the caves and coastal areas of Britain, Manchester's Dave Clarkson switches his attention to the fading arcades and promenades of towns such as Rhyl and Margate. Using augmented field recordings of attractions and carnivals, the tracks here are both nostalgic and noisy, as on the whooshing synths and euphoric shrieking of 'Rollercoaster Ghost', or the evocative 'Penny Arcade In The Rain'. Spellbinding sonic postcards from a rapidly eroding seaside culture. **MS**

CRAVEN FAULTS

Live Works

LOWFOLD WORKS

This is a double vinyl album from the mysterious Yorkshire modular artist Craven Faults, featuring extended reworkings of live material plus new track 'Ravelands Brow'. And by "extended", we're talking one track per side. 'Eller Ghyll' includes an ecstatic synth loop that's somewhere between The Who's 'Baba O'Riley' and Philip Glass. The wonderful 'Deipkier' is like John Carpenter being slowly awoken by the soft thump of a drum. And 'Slack Sley & Temple' mines an ominous bass worm for all it's worth. Utterly hypnotic – just don't listen while operating heavy machinery. **JB**

DORIAN CONCEPT

What We Do For Others

BRAINFEEDER

Part of the Flying Lotus/Brainfeeder family for almost a decade now, Oliver Johnson's latest album as Dorian Concept flits between glitchy funk and Aphex-style abstraction, occasionally gilded by heavily treated vocals. None of these 13 tracks outstay their welcome (there's nothing over the four-minute mark) and while 'What We Do For Others' is not likely to see him step out from under his label boss' shadow, there's a playful toybox charm to tracks like 'You're Untouchable' and 'Not You Anymore' that makes this a wholly agreeable way to spend 40 minutes. **WS**

RAINY MILLER

Desquamation (Fire, Burn. Nobody)

HEAD II

For Rainy Miller, dystopia isn't something on a TV screen or outside a window, so much as somewhere inside his head. On his debut album, the Manchester artist channels Tricky's internal paranoia through forlorn autotuned vocals on tracks like '> Is 2 Die'. Featuring collaborations with a host of fellow northerners including Blackhaine, Moseley and Space Afrika, these ambient soundscapes are suffused with the urban dread of drill and weightless grime, and riven with industrial noise. At once brutal and beautiful, visceral and vulnerable, 'Desquamation' is absolutely essential listening. **PC**

CARLA DAL FORNO

Come Around

KALLISTA

Carla Dal Forno invites us over on her third album, but it's a bit of a hike – after years in London and Berlin she's returned to Australia, basing herself in the historic gold rush city of Castlemaine. The sunny climes are in no way incongruous with her wispy, stripped-back post-punk – here she sounds luminously solar-powered. 'Stay Awake' is a ghost of Joy Division, while the title track employs the same measured bass and nonchalant vocals that made her 2019 single 'So Much Better' so addictive. Pure gold. **CF**

LEVERTON FOX

In The Flicker

NOT APPLICABLE

Leverton Fox are improvisational trio Alex Bonney (trumpet), Tim Giles (drums) and Isambard Khroustaliov (electronics). 'In The Flicker' found the group challenging themselves by recording in a Sussex wood, and you can hear chance encounters with the landscape on 'Amethyst Deceiver', where a sparseness reveals birdsong and gentle breezes. In contrast to such delicate moments, the robust 'LIDAR Hailing UFOs' is dominated by faltering drum machines, echoing percussion, drone-like swells and unpredictable electronics. Grounded and naturalistic, yet brilliantly adventurous and otherworldly. **MS**

DEAD VOICES ON AIR
Abrader Redux
COLD SPRING

Launched with 'Concretion', an opening track that sounds like a 16-minute procession towards a hydraulic forge, Mark Spybey's clanging industrial sounds on 'Abrader Redux' are long, dense and purposely hypnotic. The addition of Skinny Puppy's cEvin Key on 'Papa Papa Revers' adds a twist, but does little to dissuade you that perhaps former Zoviet France man Spybey is taking a group of primary school children on an extended tour of the local mill. If David Lynch ever fancied rebooting 'Eraserhead', this would be the perfect soundtrack. **JS**

LOMOND CAMPBELL
Under This Hunger Moon We Fell
ONE LITTLE INDEPENDENT

Scottish musician and producer Lomond Campbell taps into spooling, splicing and supermoons on the third and final instalment of his series of tape loop experiments. Following on from albums 'LŪP' and 'Lost Loops', this latest effort once again showcases Campbell's staggering compositional skill, though with a slightly darker tone – the title track is like a spooky nighttime walk through dense forest. There's a transcendent, magical energy, throughout, best exemplified by the radiant 'Alters' and bustling dancefloor-adjacent groove of 'The Mountain And The Pendulum'. Lovely soundscapes, cleverly made. **CF**

BOERD
Caution: Fragile
BLUNDA

By day, Bård Ericson is a bassist in Sweden's Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. By night, he assumes the lower-case persona of boerd to create crystalline trip hop, and his sixth solo album is a soothing confection. 'Stay' boasts a heavenly string section, with Stella Explorer's icy vocals providing a soaring chorus. The contributions of Explorer and fellow Swedish singer Venus Anon provide translucent pop glamour, but Ericson's own instrumentals also create heartwarming magic. 'Lullaby' is sumptuous, late-night piano bar jazz, and 'Slow Ghost' reeks of woodsmoke in lonely log cabins. **BF**

MISTER WATER WET
Top Natural Drum
SODA GONG

Like a Japanese water garden being dismantled, the first moments of 'Top Natural Drum' are quite strange, but then this *is* experimental electronicist Mister Water Wet. The moniker of Kansas City-based Puerto Rican musician Iggy Romeu, this album is the clearest articulation yet of his idiosyncratic wonkiness. Chimes and trickling field recordings tumble on 'Soak', while 'Frass' jumbles up scratching guiro and a broken modem buzz. Submerge yourself in the rhythms and textures and a peculiar logic emerges, where Romeu's patterns begin to make perfect, hypnotic sense. **ST**

INFINITY ROOM
Stratospheric Scatter
BANDCAMP

Who's that, lurking outside the MoD base with an Argon8 hidden beneath their cagoule? Why, it's Nottinghamshire Cold War obsessive Jez Shearing, tramping across drizzle-soaked moors with this fine sequel to 2021's 'Tropospheric Scatter'. The opening bars of 'Cold' establish the mood – John Le Carré quotes swathed in austere synth lines. Boards Of Canada fans will find much to love, as will admirers of The Soulless Party's similarly bleak take on post-war paranoia. From the fuzzy bleeps of 'Nord' to the spectral choirs of 'Agnusdei', it's deliciously desolate stuff. **BF**

LÉO KUPPER
Electronic Works & Voices 1977-1987
SUB ROSA

Although not as well-known as other early electronic pioneers, Belgian composer Léo Kupper deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as Stockhausen, Pierre Schaeffer or Wendy Carlos. A daring sonic adventurer, this amazing collection showcases four long-form pieces generated via Kupper's GAME machine – programmable sonic cells, manipulated into complex electronic loops and processed voices. The terrifying 'Aerosons' is like having a salivating alien xenomorph up close, while the spectral whisperings of 'Le Rêveur Au Sourire Passager' discombobulate and exhilarate in equal measure. Mind, blown. **VI**

VAAL
Love Reversed
BEDOUIN

Do a 'Family Fortunes'-style survey on Vaal's real identity and most people would probably plump for either a post-rock act or a Berlin techno producer dabbling in experimental fare. Likely very few would guess this is Eliot Sumner, Sting's child, who also moonlighted as sugar-coated synthpop act I Blame Coco. But lifting the disguise doesn't detract from the obvious thrills of their second album, which peaks with the surging guitars of 'Song Zero', the pummelling techno of 'GABA' and the breakbeat-inflected stylings of '4th Generation Smartphone'. **PC**

MONTPARNASSE MUSIQUE
Archeology
REAL WORLD

Algerian-French producer Nadjib Ben Bella and South African DJ Aero Manyelo are Montparnasse Musique, a pan-African duo who work with a host of collaborators. Together, they mine the acoustic flavour of the continent, marrying it with electronica and the eccentric beats of Johannesburg. 'Archeology' features Congotronics mainstays Konono No 1, Mbongwana Star and Kasai Allstars, making for an explosive juxtaposition of call-and-response vocals and Tuareg-style guitars, set against squelching synths on 'Bonsoir' and alacritous drum machine claps on 'Luendu'. An eye-popping sonic blend. **JA**

ELIZABETE BALČUS - PHOTO: ZANE ZELMENE

ELIZABETE BALČUS
Hotel Universe
MOTHLAND

This second long-player from Latvian singer-songwriter Elizabete Balčus is as vivid a sonic collage as its acid-trip cover hints at. Take a taste of the wacky recipe-book ponderings of 'Asparagus Or Brussels Sprouts?', a question posed amid pastoral synths right out of a lucid 1980s dream scene. Luxuriate in the flower-power dreampop of 'Kami Rainbows', or be transported by the mind-bending avant-electronica of 'Venus Flytrap'. Balčus' sonic cosmos offers more twists and turns than Alice's Wonderland, with every sound and texture exquisitely alien. She's very much in a league of her own. **FH**

WMTID
Fuck Fear
BANDCAMP

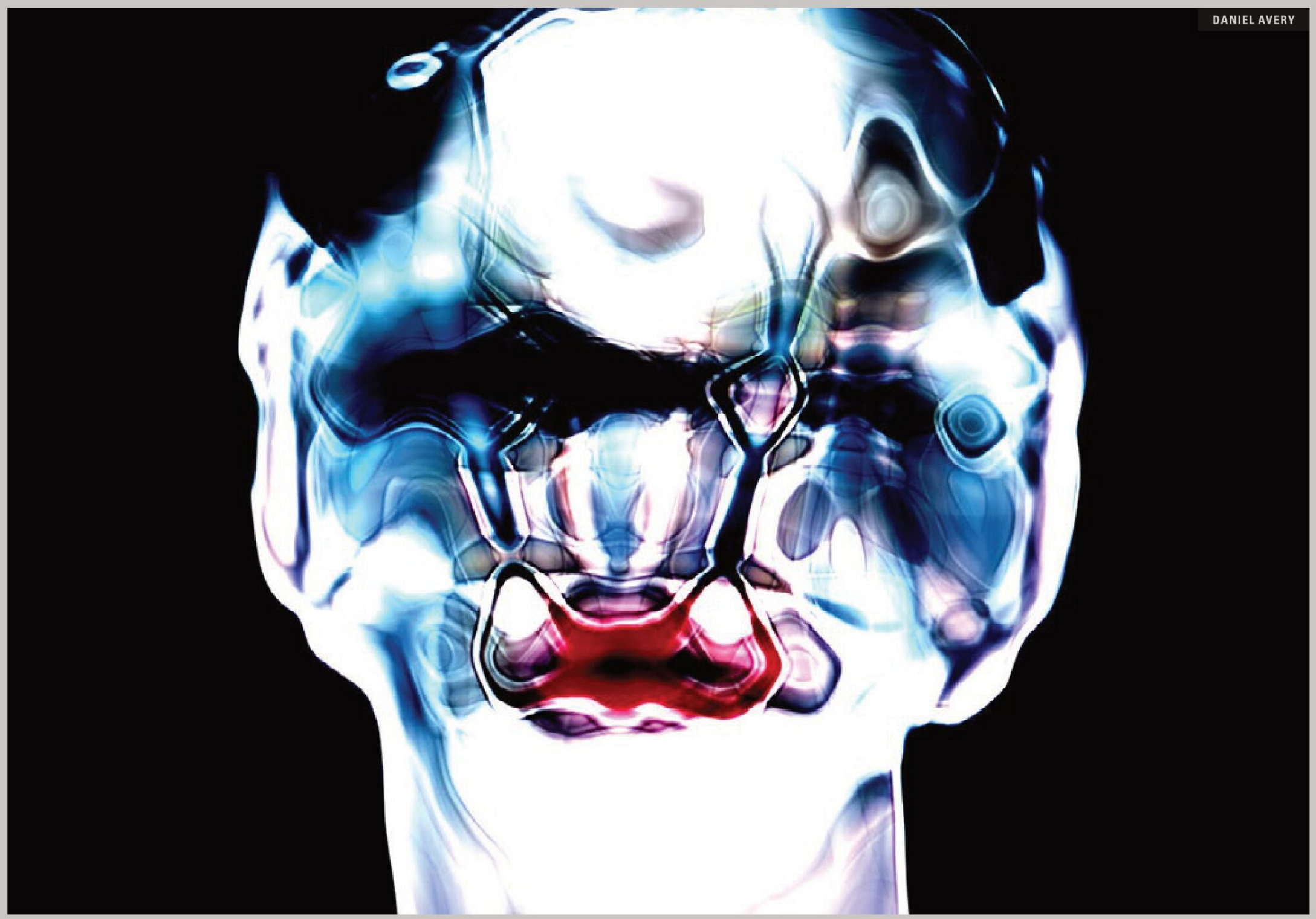
While the WMTID (Well Martin This Is Different) biography reads like a who's who of the gothic underground of 1980s Leeds, this third album proper – their first in 30 years – is the brainchild of Richard Rouska alone. Standout 'The Prince Is Dead!' comes in like a Moroder/Wolfgang Press juggernaut, and elsewhere, 'Fuck Fear' is primarily rooted in contaminated punk disco, veering from the twisted industrial nostalgia of 'Tin Man' and 'Zombie Girl' to the yearning choral anger of 'Fists'. Electrifying stuff. **MJ**

MEHMET ASLAN
The Sun Is Parallel
PLANISPHERE EDITORIAL

The rigorous rhythms of Mehmet Aslan's debut album are as mesmerising as the swing of a hypnotist's pendulum, with the Basel-raised producer exploring his Turkish heritage via a vibrant interplay of electronics and live guitar and drums. The propulsive beat of 'Domo' doesn't quit, and 'Garden' features the percussive talents of Italian musician Valentina Magaletti, while 'If I Can Belong Anywhere' blends atmospheric techno with a moving vocal sample of American writer James Baldwin, and 'Tangerine Sun' is a Middle Eastern-inflected psych-acid workout. Impressively cohesive and ridiculously good. **CF**

SOLAR CORONA
Pace
LOVERS & LOLLYPOPS

Together for nearly a decade, Portuguese space rockers Solar Corona add a spot of electro-dub sound processing into the mix on their latest album, 'Pace'. 'Heavy Metal Salts' and 'Thrust' both feature crackling hyperspatial riffs, sky-splitting guitar and phasey debris, while the title cut is a percussive ambient affair, conjuring images of a chirping assembly of insects patiently waiting to take over the world. But the standout track here is 'Parker SP', its irresistible bass groove and floating synth feeling like a more propulsive Pink Floyd. Out of this world. **JB**



DANIEL AVERY
Ultra Truth
PHANTASY SOUND

Sometimes you have to go backwards to go forwards. For his fifth record, Bournemouth-born Daniel Avery, ensconced in his Thameside studio, went way back to his teenage influences, including Deftones, Portishead, Nick Cave and the films of David Lynch. The intense moods of these artists permeate 'Ultra Truth' like smoke.

'Lone Swordsman', a burbling tribute to Andrew Weatherall, is a high point, but it's matched by first single 'Chaos Energy', a dense, churning breakbeat epic. 'Higher' and 'Devotion' are forays into dark jungle and left-field rave. There's even a nod to William Basinski's seminal 'The Disintegration Loops' in the minimalist piano decay of 'New Faith'.

These moody productions are elevated with vocals from the likes of HAAi (with a ghostly lead on 'Wall Of Sleep'), Sherelle, Kelly Lee Owens, James Massiah and AK Paul. 'Ultra Truth' is a massive left turn from 2021's Aphex Twin/Boards Of Canada-influenced 'Together In Static' and a lifetime away from the hedonistic, 303-driven debut 'Drone Logic'. By mining the past, Avery has created something that will resonate long into the future. **AT**

µ-ZIQ
Hello
PLANET MU

Thank heavens for reissues. Or rather more specifically in this case, the 25th anniversary version of the classic fourth µ-Ziq album 'Lunatic Harness'. The whole process of revisiting and remastering that album spurred Mike Paradinas into a flurry of creative activity, giving rise to both the 'Magic Pony Ride' album and the 'Goodbye' EP earlier this year.

The nine tracks here, with the manic junglist beats and distinctively sentimental melodies of 'Lunatic Harness' again acting as a creative starting point, complete the package. And, once more, they're as futuristic and frenzied as you could desire, more balanced than the drill 'n' bass terrorism of Aphex but with bigger, sharper teeth than Luke Vibert's gorgeously chummy and approachable Plug project.

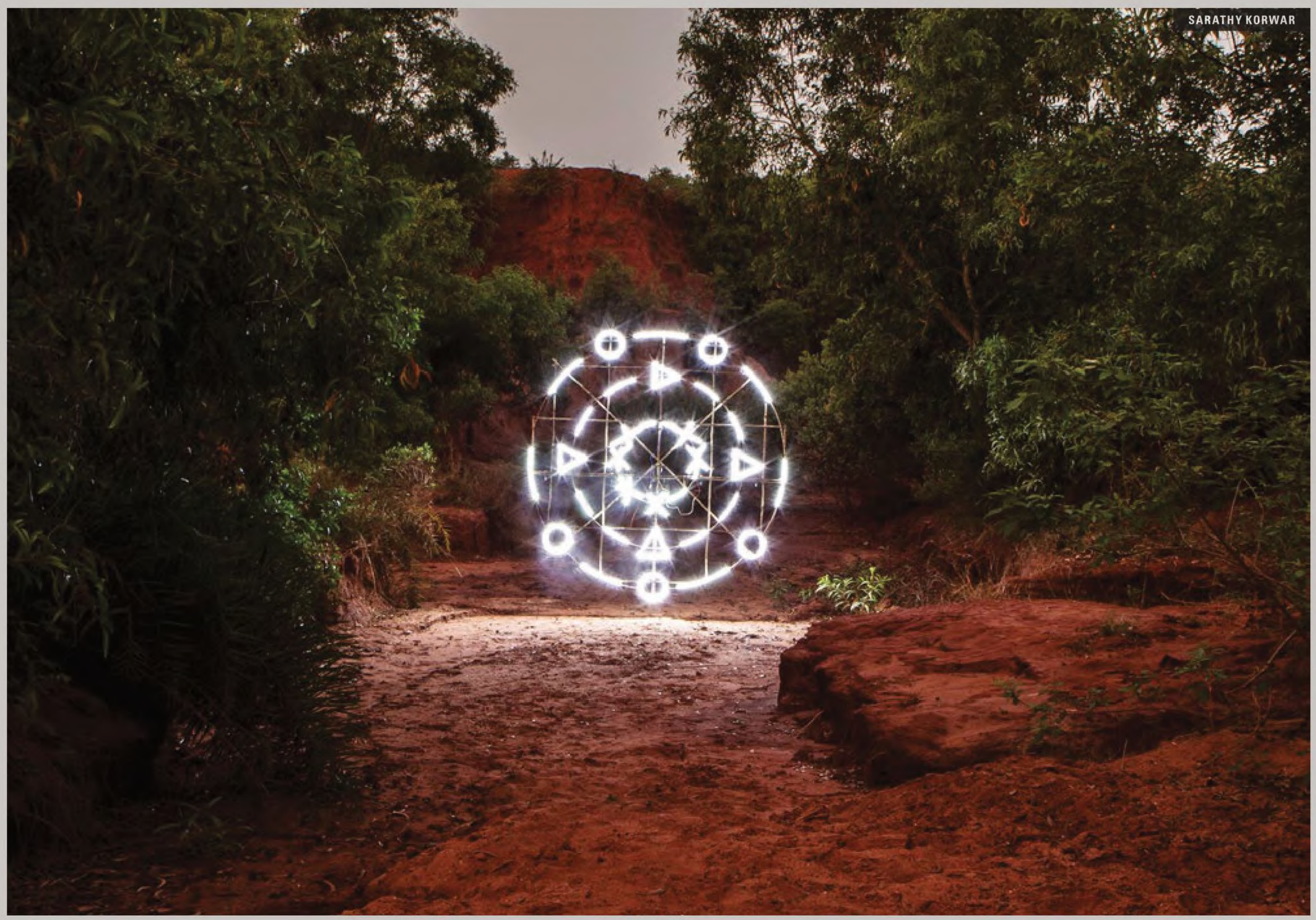
Notable mentions go to the bassy brilliance of 'Iggy's Song', the gospel-infused Apache breaks of 'Green Chaos' and the teasing throbber 'Pentagonal Antiprism', but the album as a whole is a weak-link-free zone. **BW**

TO ROCOCO ROT
The John Peel Sessions
BUREAU B

You know it's a Peel Session when we open with the famed DJ deliberately mangling the band's name. These old radio recordings, from sessions that took place between 1997 and 1999, rekindle an overlooked trio who represented a specific style of 90s electronica. To Rococo Rot (Robert Lippok, Ronald Lippok and Stefan Schneider) made music that was soundtracky, organic, post-rocky and vibrant. It's surprising Edgar Wright never included them in the music for 'Spaced'.

How 90s are those snare reverbs on their remix of The Pastels' 'Thomson Colour'? And there's something Unkle-ish about the loose drums over the super-digital 'Telema', the only single represented here.

Of the three To Rococo Rot albums featured, 1999's 'The Amateur View' gets the most airtime. However, the self-titled first album shines with primal didgeridoo glitches and the guitar loop of 'Tour De Repéchage'. As for the tracks made especially for this Peel sesh, 'Glück' sounds like a skipping CD player possessed by clockwork cats. All kinds of ace. Let this Rot set in. **FR**



SARATHY KORWAR

Kalak

THE LEAF LABEL

Hot on the heels of his excellent 'Shruti Dance' collaboration with Auntie Flo, classically trained percussionist Sarathy Korwar is back with an equally impressive solo follow-up. 'Kalak' is an Indo-futurist manifesto, celebrating the richness of South Asian culture and spirituality. The London-based musician propels his heritage into a future that breaks free of Eurocentrism and skewed colonial attitudes, and everything here is framed around a circular rhythmic pattern based on the Kalak symbol that gives the album its title.

Korwar fuses past and present with skittering polyrhythms, blinding electronics, resonant vocals and warming melodic richness. Recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World studios, produced by NYC's Photay and featuring guest musicians including The Comet Is Coming's Danalogue on synths, the album's kaleidoscopic palette coalesces vibrantly.

The defiant spirit of 'Utopia Is A Colonial Project' blasts out with urgent percussion and dizzying flourishes of sax and keys, while standout 'Remember Begum Rokheya' weaves tropical birdsong, hypnotic massed voices, traditional woodwind and pulsating drum patterns around a mesmeric refrain. Radiant and magnificent. **CG**

PEDRO VIAN & MANA

Cascades

MODERN OBSCURE MUSIC

Last year, Pedro Vian's PRSNT project featured truncated tracks – all around 30 seconds long – from Laurie Spiegel, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Visible Cloaks and others, representing attention spans atrophied by the internet. However, the Catalan artist's new collaboration with Italian sound designer Daniele Mana has been inspired by something requiring slightly more concentration – Dante's epic poem 'Inferno', about the soul's descent through hell. A hell that has firmly frozen over, if the icy feel of 'Cascades' is anything to go by.

For those familiar with the pair's solo works, it's Mana's Hyperdub albums like 'Seven Steps Behind' – more than Vian's downcast techno – that are the guiding light, particularly the way acoustic instruments are processed into eerie electronic drones on 'Cascade 4' and 'Cascade 9'. Ample use of the Lyra analogue synthesiser, designed to replicate biological processes, adds feelings of something sinister stirring within. As genuinely unsettling as it is at times, Vian and Mana's vision of hell is often heavenly to the ears. **PC**

MODIFIED TOY ORCHESTRA

Silfurberg

BIT-PHALANX MUSIC

Faced with a giddy tower of luridly wrapped presents, some children eschew the actual gifts and spend Christmas Day playing with the empty cardboard boxes instead. Birmingham's Brian Duffy goes one step further – since 2004, he has been pulling the sound chips from discarded toys to create evocative symphonies of vintage parps and bleeps.

It's 12 years since his previous album 'Plastic Planet', and 'Silfurberg' feels less playful, more purposeful. The title itself? A transparent stone used by seafaring Vikings to locate the sun on gloomy expeditions. Intrepid voyage is the theme here, as dismantled Casio keyboards transport us to the stars.

'And Yet It Moves' has the warm throb of an interstellar colliery band, and by the time we reach the discordant tides of 'We Live To Look Out The Window', we're clearly passing into new dimensions. 'Pathloss' is riddled with the final, pulsing beeps of a vanishing space probe, while 'Into The Bulk' finds glacial, piano-led calm beyond the hurly-burly of our own cosmic plane. It's a bold and beautiful journey. **BF**

SUNDA ARC
Night Lands
GONDWANA

When contemplating producing their second Sunda Arc album, brothers Nick and Jordan Smart – also two-thirds of Norwich's Mammal Hands – found themselves in a thoroughly dystopian mood, leaving an indelible impression on their semi-electronic, semi-acoustic, post-everything sensibilities. That manifests itself from the start of 'Night Lands', as the opening track, 'Distant Siren', is led by a passage of detached, mournful bass clarinet, around which spiral uncertain beats and restless pulses.

Elsewhere, strange vocal textures and howling electronics imbue 'Phantom's Gift' and 'Beacons' with a brooding, unsettled edge. Having seen Sunda Arc play live in 2018, their mastery of non-linear builds and the sheer intensity of their rhythms was something else, and you can hear that in abundance among the forceful beats and aggressive washes of rough-edged synths on 'Neon Forest'. 'Night Lands' feels darker and more introspective than 2020's 'Tides' – it's reflective of the uncertain time in which it was made, and all the more engaging for it. **MS**

SHARRON KRAUS
Kin
NIGHTSHADE

The alt-folk, gently psychedelic and subtly electronic work of Sharron Kraus has a spellbinding quality that seems to build with each successive release. Sitting somewhere between a more Earth-bound Jane Weaver and a more distinctly British Meg Baird, this latest album continues on the trajectory set by 2018's 'Joy's Reflection Is Sorrow', which was mixed by Dean Honer of Moonlandingz/Eccentronic Research Council fame.

Musing on the isolation the pandemic plunged us into, 'Kin' explores the bonds we experience with our fellow humans and the natural world, and what happens when those bonds are tested. On beautifully crafted tracks like the hypnotic 'The Trees Keep On Growing', timeless strings and wistful flute are layered beneath Kraus' pensive, bell-clear vocals. Elsewhere, and particularly on the outstanding 'The Locked Garden', retro-futuristic analogue synths add compelling pace and a thrilling, night-shaded ambivalence. Very highly recommended. **CG**

THE HUMAN LEAGUE
The Virgin Years
EMI

'The Virgin Years' is a five-disc retrospective that presents The Human League Mk 2's nine-year journey from the Sheffield discotheques of 'Dare' to the NYC dancefloors of 'Romantic?'.

The oxygen-sucking 'Dare' and 1983's extended 'Fascination!' EP delivered a synthpop blueprint that the band would find hard to escape, but with the electro-phunk of '(Keep Feeling) Fascination! (Improvisation)' they pointed to the future. 'Hysteria', released in 1984, attempted to fulfil this promise but, with the exception of 'The Lebanon' and its alternative 80s guitars, it sounded largely uninspired.

Surprisingly, the criminally ignored 'Crash' and 'Romantic' albums have aged far better than their predecessors. The Jam & Lewis-produced 'Crash' from 1986 introduced Chic guitar chops, horns and slap bass to great effect, while 1990's 'Romantic?' found them finally beginning to perfect the fusion of their northern pop essence with those NYC grooves. Sadly, the zeitgeist had moved on by then, but here, these often-dismissed albums are given the attention they deserve. **MJ**

HELEN GANYA

Polish The Machine

BELLA UNION

Stellar melodies, electronically charged

What's in a name? Helen Ganya's third album is the first where she steps out from behind her Dog In The Snow moniker. In April, she quietly announced on Facebook "farewell to DITS and hello to my for reals Western and Thai name".

Born to a Thai mother and Scottish father, Ganya spent her early years in Singapore before settling in Brighton. Entering her 30s has led to a rethink of who she is and how she wants to represent herself. Emboldened, she's discarded not only her previous sobriquet but also the dark atmospherics of the last DITS record, 2019's 'Vanishing Lands'. On this second record for Bella Union, she's questioning and rejecting the heteronormative social constructs that surround us. "I had a fear of the ordinary" are the first words she croons, on shimmering electropop opener 'I Will Hold That Hand For You'.

Some things are unchanged. Cate Le Bon and Kate Bush remain touchstones ('Afterparty' even has insistent, melodramatic drums that wouldn't be out of place on 'Running Up That Hill'), but Ganya is exploring deeper feelings, seeking a human connection.

From 'Afterparty' to the title track, she and co-producer Rob Flynn ensure that this journey of deep emotional discovery is framed in an uplifting way, through soundscapes of propulsive beats and glistening synths. This stark duality reaches its peak on the strident 'Young Girls Never Die', exposing Ganya's disgust at patriarchal norms ("The future's in my hands, he says / But why do I feel powerless?") with a shocking twist that even an irresistible full-flight chorus can't camouflage ("Young girls never die / We just rot inside").

She's certainly moved on, but there are echoes of her early influences – Scott Walker, David Lynch and Brian Eno – in the atmospheric soundbaths of 'Deep Sea', 'Devotion' and 'Blue Fruit'. The latter ambient pop gem is even punctuated by a chiming shoegaze guitar riff, which may be a nod to label boss and ex-Cocteau Twin Simon Raymonde. (Ganya even played guitar in his alternative collective, Lost Horizons.)

Mixing art-pop, dreampop, atmospherics and psychedelia, this record thrums with energy, confidence and euphoria, making it a startlingly original statement that should make her (real) name.

ANTHONY THORNTON

Brief Encounters

Songwriter extraordinaire **Helen Ganya** tackles our quick-fire questions

Hello, Helen. Where are you right now and what can you see?

"I'm currently in Kefalonia, overlooking the sea!"

People may know you as Dog In The Snow – why the pseudonym?

"I thought an alias would allow me the space to create whatever I wanted. I think it helped me build up the confidence to not need a moniker."

Why the change of name now?

"People used to make fun of my Thai name, however the rise of anti-Asian hate during the Covid pandemic made me realise visibility and representation is key and necessary."

Your last album, 'Vanishing Lands', came to you during a period of "strange dreams", right?

"The dreams usually come in bouts. My last series was around animals within the walls of my flat that would spill out into the room."

The new album is called 'Polish The Machine'... what machine?

"Whatever social constructs and systems we feel we must adhere to. The title track uses it more as a question – do we actually like to polish the machine? I think a lot of the time we don't actually know that's what we're doing."

You've recently entered your 30s, which has caused a level of questioning/re-evaluation, hasn't it?

"It sure has! How does one contend with the societal, 'normal' expectations of their 30s, particularly in the middle of climate breakdown and so many social inequalities? Part of my existential response was to go back to university and do an MSc in Climate Change."

There are some great themes on the new record. We like the idea of "slightly fearing the ordinary". Tell us about that...

"It isn't a critique on humility, or those who desire to live a good and quiet life. I see the ordinary as the systems that promote a status quo which only benefits a very small percentage of humanity. Sometimes it feels opposite to the line by US writer Joan Didion, who said: 'The centre will not hold' – it feels more like the centre *does* hold while everything breaks down around it."

You have some cracking influences – Clint Mansell, Brian Eno, David Lynch... that's a heady brew. Film is important to you?

"Yes, I love film. I can see each one of my songs visually. If I had the money and time, I would create a video for all of them!"

If you could soundtrack any film, what would it be – and why?

"If someone created a film that was a claustrophobic mix of 'Hard To Be A God' with a suburban sci-fi world like 'Vivarium', plus a tinge of Shirley Jackson-type horror, then sign me up!"

Buried Treasure

SANDRA CROSS
The MMs Bar Recordings
TRUNK, 2011

As someone who writes about a lot of weird music, I can get desensitised to it. The soundtrack to an imaginary film about school dinners? Meh. A suite of Casio madrigals created in a haunted lighthouse? Boring. So if I said that an album of train announcements and general carriage ambience was one of my all-time favourites, you might not believe me. But it's true, and here's why.

While travelling on Midland Mainline between Leicester and London, artist Sandra Cross decided to record the announcements which informed passengers of various delights from the train's buffet carriage, known as MMs Bar. These pieces, captured by Cross in 2006 and 2007, eventually made their way on to William English's 'Wavelength' programme on Resonance FM, and, having been heard by Jonny Trunk, were then released as 'The MMs Bar Recordings' on his label in 2011.

At that point, I was a massive fan of field recordists such as musician (and Cabaret Voltaire co-founder) Chris Watson, whose work tended to revolve around the natural world. But what I hadn't really encountered were artists exploring the complete mundanity of everyday life and actually finding magic there.

I listened to the record's hubbub of announcements and carriage chatter obsessively, fascinated with how it registered between stark documentary and surrealist radio play. I began to recognise the hilarious microtonal variations between train managers, the idiosyncratic pause as one tries to remember the (fairly extortionate) cost of Quavers, or the raised intonation as another delivers the official excuse of the day for why hot drinks aren't available. It's immersive – you can almost feel the touch of grubby train seats next to your skin, as the person sitting next to you tries to read your newspaper while munching on their over-priced Quavers.

It's a shame that 'The MMs Bar Recordings' isn't more widely appreciated and held in the same regard as, say, those brilliant compilations of adverts from pirate radio stations which emerged recently. Where those records find a kind of haunted magic from within the detritus of a particular subculture, Cross manages to find it in ubiquity, in a situation that we've all experienced but to which we've never quite paid attention.

SPENSER TOMSON

ACID KLAUS
Step On My Travelator: The Imagined Career Trajectory Of Superstar DJ & Dance Pop Producer Melvin Harris
ZEN FC

Conceptual, alter ego-driven spectacular

Adrian Flanagan, aka Acid Klaus, is one of those peculiar Zelig-like characters who seems to pop up everywhere. He can be found steering the International Teachers Of Pop and Eccentronic Research Council, and is known for corralling the likes of Fat White Family, Sean and Yoko Lennon, Self Esteem, Philip Oakey and the Village People's Randy Jones onto his Moonlandingz album. The late 1990s even saw him serving a brief stint in The Fall – which was a bit like National Service if you grew up in Salford, as he did.

Yet if you mention his name to anyone not completely clued up, you'll get less than a flicker of recognition. It can't all be down to the trademark bucket hat and shades that he's rarely seen without. Hopefully, it's a situation that's about to change with the arrival of Flanagan's Acid Klaus project, one which puts him very much at the centre of proceedings rather than lurking around the edges. 'Step On My Travelator' is effectively his lockdown album, but neither is it a bout of masturbatory self-examination, nor the sound of Flanagan locked off from collaborative fun. Rather, having created a clutch of impeccably groovy backing tracks very much in his trademark dancefloor style – drawing on electro, house, disco and techno – he invented a narrative about the rise and fall of imaginary superstar DJ Melvin Harris and started enlisting vocalists to help him tell the story.

Along the way, we're treated to heaps of wry electronic pop brilliance. After the thumping title track comes the sleek 'Party Sized Away Day', with Sink Ya Teeth's Maria Uzor adding her sultry voice to a spacious builder, lightly coated in acid house trimmings. 'Bethlehem Or Bust', which represents our mythical DJ's crowning early success at a free party in Wales, is a protest song about empire and aggressive expansionism, sung in Welsh and directed specifically at the English – but equally applicable to Ukraine in 2022 or the Israeli/Palestinian conflict.

'I Used To Be A DJ In A Club (But Now I'm Just A DJ In My Bedroom)' uses vocoder vocals to gently mock the the generation of DJs forced to go online to play during lockdown, before the final two songs – the unexpected country ballad 'My Hat's On Fire' and the exquisite, Maxine Peake-voiced 'Eulogy To A Quiet Life' – bring things to a close. Eccentric and ingenious, certainly, but always accessible and welcoming, this is pure synthpop gold for the 21st century.

BEN WILLMOTT

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Eins Und Zwei Und Drei Und Vier Vol 2: Deutsche Experimentelle Pop-Musik 1978-1987

BUREAU B

The second compilation of delightfully obscure German art-pop rarities from Hamburg's Bureau B mines even weirder depths than its 2021 predecessor. A generous, 20-track compendium, it serves as an odyssey through the hidden archives of proto-kosmische experimentation.

While offering flashes of the genre's influences via elements of punk, melodic free-form jazz, psychedelic rock, spoken word and cosmic synthpop, the music never quite settles into any neat generic category. The result is a frenetic collage of strange samples, wavy vocals and offbeat expressionism that feels both joyfully embedded in its time and alarmingly contemporary in composition.

Highlights range from Phantom Band's 'Dream Machine' (like a pared-back, deconstructed foreshadowing of early Underworld), Notorische Reflexe's starkly ethereal alt-dance track, 'The Wisp', and 'Der Mond', a discordant, haunting requiem by Maria Zerfall. Bureau B's meticulous assembly of these weird and compelling gems shows them in their very best light. **CC**

SINEMIS

Dua

INJAZERO

Sinemis is the new alias of Injazero label founder and electronic producer Sine Buyuka. Drawn to traditional Sufi trance music, the creative catalyst for 'Dua' came during her convalescence from an emergency operation in Turkey. Not unlike the bed-bound epiphany that prompted Brian Eno's journeys into ambient music, Buyuka's recovery found her similarly inspired, in this case to explore imaginative new settings for Sufi reference points.

Pieces like 'Flow' and 'Gazel' are dominated by ethereality and a sense of wonder. Imbued with pin-prick melodies, traditional ney flutes, breathy textures and amorphous, enveloping soundscapes, they produce an absorbing, hypnotic sensation that leaves you feeling subtly altered. 'The Bazaar' is firmer and more melodic, framed by a rhythm that seems to be following its own inquisitive path while still yielding a similar, gently transcendent feel. Resonant music for a heightened state of awareness. **MS**

DECIUS

Decius Vol 1

THE LEAF LABEL

You know you've struck the right chord between seductive and sleazy when Iggy Pop describes you as "a loose amalgam of England's most troublesome, wayward and wanton musicians".

Decius is Lias Saoudi (Fat White Family), together with Liam and Luke May (Trashmouth Records) and Quinn Whalley of Warmduscher and minimal techno duo Paranoid London. The group came about when the May brothers witnessed the Fat Whites at a Trashmouth night at the Brixton Windmill, a show that apparently had the energy of acid house, but wasn't acid house, obviously. Together, they've been putting out dark, weird, sweaty house grooves since 2014, collected here for the first time.

The opening track, 'Ain't No Church', has an eerie 'The Jezebel Spirit' vibe – not unlike a seance in a spooky nightclub – things soon ramp up, however. "Decius is little more than a throbbing question mark," says Saoudi, and with Titles like 'Roberto's Tumescence' and 'Masculine Encounter II', a large interrobang is indeed forthcoming. **JA**

CERRONE - PHOTO: SARAH BASTIN

CERRONE

Cerrone By Cerrone

BECAUSE MUSIC

French disco innovator Cerrone deserves more kudos. His 1977 hit, 'Supernature', heralded a whole new commercial era for electronic music, alongside songs like 'I Feel Love' and 'Trans-Europe Express', and yet too often the track is left out of the conversation. That song was a huge hit all across Europe and even made the UK Top 10, so it says much about Marc Cerrone's pioneering spirit that he continues to change his sound with the proverbial weather.

'Cerrone By Cerrone' revisits some of his greatest moments over the last five decades, but with a difference – classic tracks like 'Hooked On You' are given a modern makeover, while 'Love In C Minor' is remixed by Dimitri From Paris. Instrumentals such as the futuristic 'Striptease' work with high-fidelity 21st century treatments, while the aforementioned 'Supernature' has a searing sci-fi riff that can never be diminished, even when the accompanying vocals are drenched in vocoder. 'Cerrone By Cerrone' can be judged as an indirect success, in that it inspires you to revisit his superior original work. **JA**

MABE FRATTI

Se Ve Desde Aquí

UNHEARD OF HOPE

Guatemalan musician Mabe Fratti describes the emotional core of 'Se Ve Desde Aquí' ('It Is Seen From Here') as "less protected" than her previous work. Released in 2021, 'Será Que Ahora Podremos Entendernos' concealed its intentions beneath a tumult of amorphous instrumentation. While the pieces here are similarly abstract and beguiling, bold sentiments pierce through to register with clarity and precision.

On opening track 'Con Esfuerzo' ('With Effort'), it feels as though Fratti is summoning energy from the ground and the air, as clattering percussion and eerie strings are sucked into a gradual upward whirr. Having drawn this power to her fingertips, the subsequent songs feel supercharged with it.

'No Se Ve Desde Acá' layers up magnetic electronics, while 'Cuestión De Tiempo' recalls the angular tropicalia of Beautify Junkyards side-project Hidden Horse, but replacing their undertones of cinematic horror with bittersweet melancholic radiance. **ST**

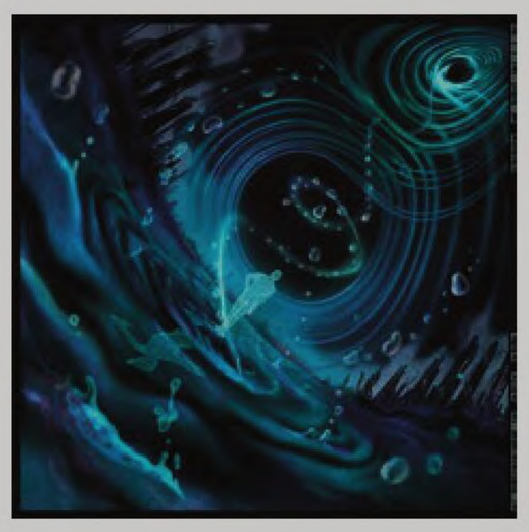
COH MEETS ABUL MOGARD

CoH Meets Abul Mogard

HOUNDSTOOTH

The real identity of Abul Mogard is revealed at last. He is not, as we were led to believe, a retired Belgrade steelworker whose ears were perpetually ringing with the ambient drone of the foundry. Nor is he (as was once rumoured) Aphex Twin. He is in fact pioneering Italian 1990s electronicist Guido Zen, once of Gamers In Exile and more recently part of kosmische outfit Brain Machine. Unmasked, Zen unites with another cult figure here – Ivan Pavlov (aka COH), the Russian artist based in Sweden, who was a regular collaborator with Psychic TV and Coil's Peter Christopherson. Talk about the dark ambient dream team.

The resulting music is as imperious as you'd expect. Four extended tracks are perfectly segued, melding seamlessly into a movement that sounds like it emanated from deep space. The glacial, abstract antimatter of pieces like 'Untangled Forever' and 'Traverse Within' pulsate with nebulous energy, like consciousness stirring far out there at the fringes of time. Stunning. **CG**



PIE EYE COLLECTIVE

Tangential City

ALBERT'S FAVOURITES

Advanced urban geometry sonified

This is only his second release, but London-based Bristolian Matthew Gordon (aka Pie Eye Collective) appears to have already honed a sound that's unmistakably his own – distinctively British, contemporary, and right on the zeitgeist.

What makes his work so singular is the way this self-confessed mathematics and calculus nut takes clubby components – tech-house and dub, in particular – and recontextualises them to work alongside jazz, ambient and experimental elements. Few of his contemporaries manage this with such aplomb, aside perhaps from like-minded talents such as Loraine James, Space Afrika or Emma-Jean Thackray (with whom Gordon has played).

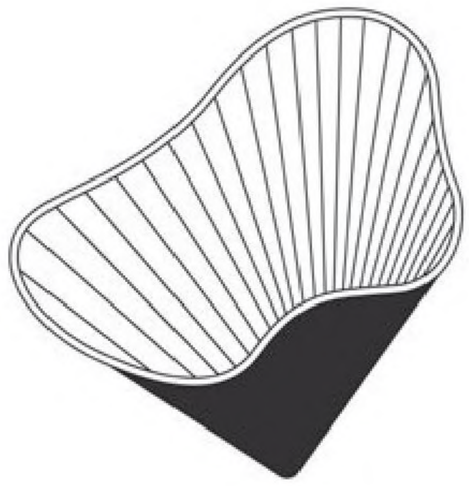
This follow-up to his lauded 2021 debut 'Salvation' is an instrumental exposition of how people experience different lives in the same city, inspired by a term coined by Gordon's brother to describe their neurodivergent conversational styles. "I've adopted 'Tangential City' as an expression of the real and metaphysical liminal realities we all exist in," says Gordon. "It's the atlas of my musical/artistic mind."

The realities he explores are bound by physical accessibility, race, gender, wealth and nationality, all of which pose obstacles to how we access urban spaces. And while this might all sound a tad academic, Gordon's musical interpretation of these ideas is anything but.

Take lead track 'Land Of Wood And Water', its title referencing Jamaica, and the indigenous Taíno name for the island, 'Xaymaca'. It opens with a sort of effervescent digital thrum before settling into a melodic, fresh-sounding space-dub groove. The whole album is shot through with similar interpretive verve, from the experimental, Jon Hassell-esque dynamics of 'Uroboros' through to the percussive nu-jazz euphoria of the skittering title track. And even if 'Axiom' leads us straight to the dancefloor with techno-acid insistence, it's in a fashion that's likely to sound future-forward in a century's time. As closing track 'The Infinite Boundary' finishes, we're left craving more of Gordon's immersive melodic abstractions and healing cosmic force. Superb.

CARL GRIFFIN

Label Profile



Label: Injazero
Location: Istanbul and London
Est: 2014

Potted History: "I had this great idea to set up a label because I was naive and very, very passionate," explains musician and Injazero founder, Sine Buyuka. "I had been a music journalist and a radio show host for a decade, and also ran a small music blog. I kept getting so many amazing demos, it made me think, 'If only I had a label…'.

"I was interning at FatCat at the time, and they had a folder for artists they wanted to sign. There was someone in there called Ambassadeurs and he had a track called 'Injazero'. I later learned that the track name was actually 'Inja' but he bounced the first version of the project file and forgot the extension 'zero' in the name. I really loved how it sounded, a made-up name – a ninja, a zero and a bit of jazz all together. All the social media handles were available too, so that was that!"

Mission Statement: "Injazero is run by me – a female artist – and I always wanted the label to be as artist-friendly as possible," says Buyuka. "Many of our acts are friends and support each other. One recently emailed me saying that working with Injazero was their first experience of a label that they could call a home. It meant the world to me! It feels like a little family. I'm also committed to making the label as eco-friendly as possible."

Key Artists & Releases: "We have been very lucky to have released music by some amazing people, like KMRU, Hinako Omori, Heinali, Halina Rice, Matt Emery and Tegh. I'm also grateful for a charity compilation we did in aid of Mind in 2018. Recent releases include a great album by Halina Rice, and Heinali's seminal live set from a bomb shelter in Ukraine. Because Injazero is a small, boutique label, I can only do a limited number of releases a year. When it's time to sign new music, I just trust the way I feel when I hear it – I have never put out anything I wasn't in love with."

Future Plans: "The plan is no plan," says Buyuka. "I think the past couple of years really taught me that. I would certainly love to reach more people but at the same time, a part of me also loves having our niche. I just want to keep releasing visionary music and art, and supporting independent artists."

Any Other Business? "To state the obvious, be aware that running an experimental label really is a labour of love. If you are not truly passionate about putting music out into the world and supporting independent artists no matter what, then you better not do it. But if you are, it becomes this magical thing that touches other peoples' lives."

For more, visit injazerorecords.bandcamp.com

First And Last And Always

Artist and musician **Richie Culver** on the first and last albums he bought, and an all-time favourite

FIRST

PUBLIC ENEMY

Fear Of A Black Planet

DEF JAM RECORDINGS, 1990

"My mind was blown when this started making its way through the corridors of the high school I went to on the outskirts of Hull. Eventually, I heard the tape and got my stepdad to copy it for me. I had no clue what I was actually listening to, but I knew I wanted to try to understand it. What I did understand is that this was definitely technically better MCing than what I was hearing on the Pleasuredome rave tapes. I copied a few more tapes myself and sold them at school so that I could afford to buy a proper copy at Woolworths."

LAST

DEREK BARON

Crooked Dances

PENULTIMATE PRESS, 2016

"This was a record I picked up at Materia Prima in Porto. I listened to the first track in the store and put it straight into my 'yes' pile. This record is like a painting to me – I love those random, sporadic bursts of NYC normality. The spine of the work is really minimal, filled with effortless and seemingly abstract gestures. I'd love to push my own practice into this kind of direction one day."

ALWAYS

BILLY WOODS & KENNY SEGAL

Hiding Places

BACKWOODZ STUDIOZ, 2019

"Since Doom passed away, it kinda left a weird hole in my life. I had been aware of Billy Woods for a while, and his storytelling is on another stratosphere. It's impossible to have him on as background music, because you just get dragged into this morbid and gloomy world he paints. The word genius gets thrown around a lot… but it's a suitable description for Billy Woods on 'Hiding Places'."

RICHIE CULVER

I Was Born By The Sea

REIF

Searing sonic portraits of modern Britain

Just when you think the UK has surely reached the nadir of its political and economic unravelling, another wave of chaos comes along, crashing on the sewage-soaked beach of a seemingly endless shit show. Hull visual artist and musician Richie Culver captures the scene from the shoreline with precise and poignant clarity on his striking debut album 'I Was Born By The Sea'.

Across eight tracks bleak, chilly electronics provide a canvas for Culver's brusque Humberside spoken-word. A knack for dry aphorisms is an artistic hallmark, his text-based paintings graffitied with lines like 'I did not get into art school but I got into Berghain' and 'Work harder working class'. Here the anti-Establishment lens and idiosyncratic vernacular becomes darkly poetic and close to the bone, evoking grey industrial landscapes and faded dreams.

The unsettling crunch of 'Create A Lifestyle Around Your Problems' finally gives way to a machine-scrambled vocal describing "the hardest working man in the Job Centre". On 'Daytime TV' his voice cuts through the echoing, metallic soundscape, "Daytime television / No breakfast / Bored of being skint / Don't want to work / Loads of ideas / Too many ideas…". This is no imagined dystopia. It's a soundtrack to real life, loaded with nuance and genuine feeling.

The unassuming triumph of 'I Was Born By The Sea' will come as no surprise to anyone who has been following Culver's musical progression. His collaboration with like-minded northern artist Blackhaine last year yielded the two-track EP 'DID U CUM YET / I'M NOT GONNA CUM', where fizzing electronics meld with acerbic meditations on social media, masculinity and the class system.

Earlier this year, Culver teamed up with the Russian experimental virtuoso Pavel Milyakov (aka Buttechno) for 'A Change Of Nothing'. All autobiographical lyricism and atmospheric drone, it was clearly a precursor to this album – 'Track 4' combining cold, galvanised ambient sounds with Culver's ominous invocations of an oil rig in the North Sea and "impending doom". On 'Pigeon Flesh', amid a chorus of insistent bleeps, we're asked to imagine a stray dog devouring a dead pigeon on the street. Instead of taking a picture "to document this vicious scene", Culver urges us to witness it in real-time, "truly in the moment".

The stark, inherent beauty at the heart of 'I Was Born By The Sea', is its insistent way of making you look – for better or for worse.

CLAIRE FRANCIS

CHRISTINA VANTZOU
No 5
KRANKY

The opening track of American composer Christina Vantzou's new album feels like a descent into the subterranean, as wisps of clammy electronics rumble and fade like echoes through a cavernous space. But as the Brussels artist takes us deeper, it becomes less like a journey into the earth and more like an odyssey into the psyche, with the occasional flicker of sunlight across cryptic rumblings of piano and modular sounds.

'Distance' tinkles nostalgic keys over hazy urban chatter, while 'Greeting' garbles melodramatic strings against birdsong and monstrous vocalisations, like a daydream slowly melting into night terror. There's a kind of disjointed impressionism that occasionally recalls the work of Yorkshire experimentalist Teresa Winter, with fragments of evocative field recordings surfacing in the mix.

The highlight is 'Memory Of Future Melody', whose circling loops of pensive cello gradually decay into feverish, disconnected sweeps, like a song slowly fading from the mind. A beautifully undefined and ethereal landscape. **ST**

LMX
Habits & Addictions
MESHWORK MUSIC

The influence of Depeche Mode and OMD on this new release by prodigious Münster musician LMX is palpable. With all its lyrical introspection and melodic, pulsating synths, the album almost feels like it comes directly from the 1980s. These songs have the capacity to transport you back in time, or at least to a dimly lit basement party somewhere. It's all the more impressive given that LMX is only 19 years old.

Following on from his 2021 release 'CTRL+S', 'Habits & Addictions' retains the deep bass and melancholy strains of his earlier work, offering perhaps a quieter, more reflective mood. 'Way Home' has echoes of The Knife's 'Deep Cuts' era, while songs like 'More Time' or 'Keep My Lane' wouldn't be out of place on the soundtrack for 'Stranger Things' or 'Dark', confirming LMX's stake in this particular form of new wave nostalgia, which feels both fresh for 2022 and steeped in historical authenticity. **CC**

SULK ROOMS
Viewers
WERRA FOXMA

Sulk Rooms is the alias of West Yorkshire electronic artist Thomas Ragsdale. The sleeve for his latest album, 'Viewers', perfectly evokes the conceptual foundation of this release – an eye stares out at you, but the lines overlaying it suggest that maybe it's us doing the viewing, on a screen. Or perhaps, in a social media world where we are all fully complicit in our own surveillance, it is both. With that image to guide us, the music on 'Viewers' is executed with a considerable sense of paranoia and darkness.

'Televisions' features fluttering, amorphous sounds that could either be suppressed euphoric rave hooks, or the electromagnetic hum of a CCTV camera. The 10-minute 'Mycorrizhal' is built from grainy texture fringed by hopeful glimpses, like a beaten-up VHS tape recording of a sunrise. 'Transmissions' focuses its gaze on a stately, haunted, cyclical melody, almost as if we've alighted upon a live-streamed organ recital from the only church to survive the apocalypse. Ephemeral, elusive and gloriously unsettling. **MS**

THE LEAF LIBRARY

Library Music: Volume One

WHERE IT'S AT IS WHERE YOU ARE

Ssssh! Using the musical equivalent of the Dewey Decimal System, the bespectacled curators of The Leaf Library collate 14 years' worth of rarities into a charming double album. The opener 'Agnes In The Square' sets the mood perfectly. Dreamy pop with a steely edge, it's a lament for the fractured love lives of refugees. "I'm sorry that you lost everything you own / I don't know where you go when the borders close," sings frontwoman Kate Gibson, as pulsing synths transport us across musical boundaries.

Elsewhere, 'Goodbye Four Walls' is a wonderfully jangly C86-style homage to urban optimism, and 'Walking Backwards' is perhaps the closest descendent of guitarist Matt Ashton's former life in Peel synthpop favourites, Saloon.

ISAN's 2008 remix of 'Losing Places' is the oldest track here, a tinkling cousin of Angelo Badalamenti's 'Twin Peaks' theme. And the sax-drenched 'A Stone In Water' – recorded this year for Modern Aviation's beautiful 'Look To Imber' compilation – brings matters bang up to date. A long-overdue anthology, it's just the ticket. **BF**

VARIOUS ARTISTS

Beirut Adrift

NORIENT

Despite the title's suggestion, we're not so much cut adrift as steered through this atmospheric compilation by the guiding hand of esteemed Lebanese writer and educator, Rayya Badran. Her selection of nine favourite tracks from Beirut acts – a moving soundtrack to a city beleaguered by political and economic crisis – is by turns both sorrowful and defiant.

'Jumana' is an exquisite opener, a sonically rich dance between accordion, metallophone and electronics from young experimental musician Yara Asmar. There's a dark turn ahead with Anthony Sahyoun's eerily sparse 'Khifat Al-Atraf', which features solemn spoken-word from Firas al-Hallak "who recounts visions of horror the city of Beirut has witnessed". Sary Moussa, meanwhile, evokes the ocean swell with his brief, rolling soundscape 'Tides', leading nicely into the cathartic drone of Fadi Tabbal's closing track 'Ceremony By The Sea'.

It's a compilation packed with highlights, but Jad Atoui & Khodor Ellaik's sprawling modular/sax epic 'Blackout' stands out, an unassuming yet poignant reflection on Beirut's ongoing power outages. An essential and inspiring collection. **CF**

GIGI MASIN

Vahinè

LANGUAGE OF SOUND

After 2020's stunning chill-fest 'Calypso', Italian producer Gigi Masin returns with an album that feels like currents flowing in two contradictory directions at the same time.

On the surface, 'Vahinè' seems not so much relaxed as utterly blissed out. 'Shadye' floats along with fragile ambience, ghostly vocals and a Vangelis-like synth hanging in echoey mid-air, and there's a full-on sunshine scorch to 'Barumini'. But at the same time, and on closer inspection, there's also a feeling of unease lurking, and it makes sense given that 'Vahinè' is a tribute to Masin's late wife.

The way the Rhodes piano on 'Valerie Crossing' gingerly edges its way up and down the keyboard with such apparent hesitation, with unresolved notes that creep into many of the climactic moments, help to neatly swerve anything one-dimensional or predictable. Another beautiful turn from the maestro of emotive ambient. **BW**

RECOIL

Unsound Methods / Liquid / subHuman

MUTE

Wilder LPs get the reissue treatment

In October, Depeche Mode announced a new album. Amid the excitement was the often-heard grumble that Alan Wilder, a member of the group from 1982 to 1995, hadn't rejoined the line-up. Wilder began releasing tracks under the alias Recoil in 1986, with a two-track 12-inch titled '1 + 2'. At the time, he described it as "an antidote to Depeche Mode". From that point on, despite Depeche's growing critical success, the relative freedom of Recoil always seemed to be a major release for Wilder.

'Bloodline' (1991) set the template for the Recoil albums that followed his exit from Depeche – 'Unsound Methods' (1997), 'Liquid' (2000) and 'subHuman' (2007), now receiving reissues by Mute – with brooding, dark ambient sounds, experimental tinkering, complex arrangements that weren't fully electronic, and the appearance of various guest vocalists.

'Unsound Methods' featured Siobhan Lynch, late spoken word artist Maggie Estep, gospel vocalist Hildia Campbell and Nitzer Ebb's Douglas McCarthy. The album found Wilder flirting with jazz and blues samples, while tracks like 'Drifting' and 'Missing Piece' (both with Lynch) were underpinned by grimy, ominous hip hop breaks. The intense, wry 'Luscious Apparatus', fronted by Estep, detailed a grim sexual encounter over squalling sounds, malevolent dub rhythms and distortion.

More of the same could be found on 'Liquid'. The album once again saw Wilder focusing predominantly on spoken word, poetry and performance artists (Nicole Blackman, Rosa Torras, Samantha Coerbell and sometime Fad Gadget/Frank Tovey manager, Reto Bühler). The standout track here remains the dubby murder soul of 'Strange Hours', featuring a gripping vocal from Diamanda Galás.

In contrast, 'subHuman' was arguably less experimental and also less of a broad collaboration. The album featured blues singer and guitarist Joe Richardson and English singer Carla Trevaskis. More of a straight rock album with electronic embellishments, its closest parallel in Wilder's career was Depeche Mode's 'Songs Of Faith And Devotion', his final album with that band.

Taken as a whole, this timely reassessment of Wilder's last three Recoil albums serves as a reminder of his dexterity as a musician, songwriter, arranger and producer. You can see why Depeche fans want him back.

MAT SMITH

BJÖRK

Fossora

ONE LITTLE INDEPENDENT

Icelandic art-pop queen goes fully fungal

It's happened. Björk has finally become a mushroom. Her alien ways have Cronenberged her from human to fungi. Just google "Björk' and 'Bluedot" and you'll see the metamorphosis in all its stripy, costumed glory.

This latest album interprets the earthiness of mycelia with an army of clarinets. Trombones, timpani and cor anglais give pastoral comfort. While woodwinds cushion us with a soft, spongy sound, Björk delivers disarmingly personal lyrics. On 'Ancestress', she talks of her mother's pacemaker and her dyslexia. "Thank you for having me," she sings on 'Her Mother's House', poignant against waterfalling vocals from Björk's daughter, Ísadóra Bjarkardóttir Barney. You'll spot her son Sindri Eldon elsewhere too.

Everyone loves mushroom patterns. The characterful spotty bits. Listen to The Hamrahlid Choir resolve into a "dig, dig, dig" refrain on 'Sorrowful Soil'. Hear the percussion rise on 'Fungal City', while the ecstatic vocals from velvet-voiced Serpentwithfeet intertwine unkempt strings. Or the airiness of 'Allow' and how it opens up the album. The foreboding bass clarinets as the toytown beat of 'Victimhood' deteriorates. Textures full of dark delights.

So far, so comforting. However, this is a Björk album. Gabber Modus Operandi's Kasimyn is the bulldozer in the mushroom fields. The Bali beat destroyer provides a devastating contrast that truly completes 'Fossora'. He joins early with 'Atopos', spiky clarinets arguing with his bad-tempered banging. He turns interlude 'Trölla-Gabba' into a horror film. Title track 'Fossora' has a twisted stadium singalong in perfect tension with angular melodic cycles, reminiscent of the naive techno that made 'Debut' such a classic. But while Björk sings about roots that "penetrate concrete and plastic", there's Kasimyn again, his pneumatic electronics smashing a hole into the Earth's core. The spirit of LFO's Mark Bell is truly among us.

If Björk is a mushroom, the organic matter she's absorbing is deeply personal. The loss of her mother, yet hope for the future. 'Fagurt Er Í Fjörðum' features a poem by Látra-Björg, an 18th century fisherwoman who believed she could cast spells with words. Maybe that's the heart of the album. Human becomes fungi becomes poet. If Björk is a mushroom, she really is as magic as ever.

FAT ROLAND

REVIEWS BY
JEREMY ALLEN,
JOE BANKS,
CLAIRE CARROLL,
PAUL CLARKE,
BOB FISCHER,
CLAIRE FRANCIS,
CARL GRIFFIN,
FREDDIE HUDSON,
VELIMIR ILIC,
MARTIN JAMES,
ISAAK LEWIS-SMITH
BEN MURPHY,
FAT ROLAND,
JOE SILVA,
MAT SMITH,
WILL SIMPSON,
ANTHONY THORNTON
SPENSER TOMSON,
BEN WILLMOTT

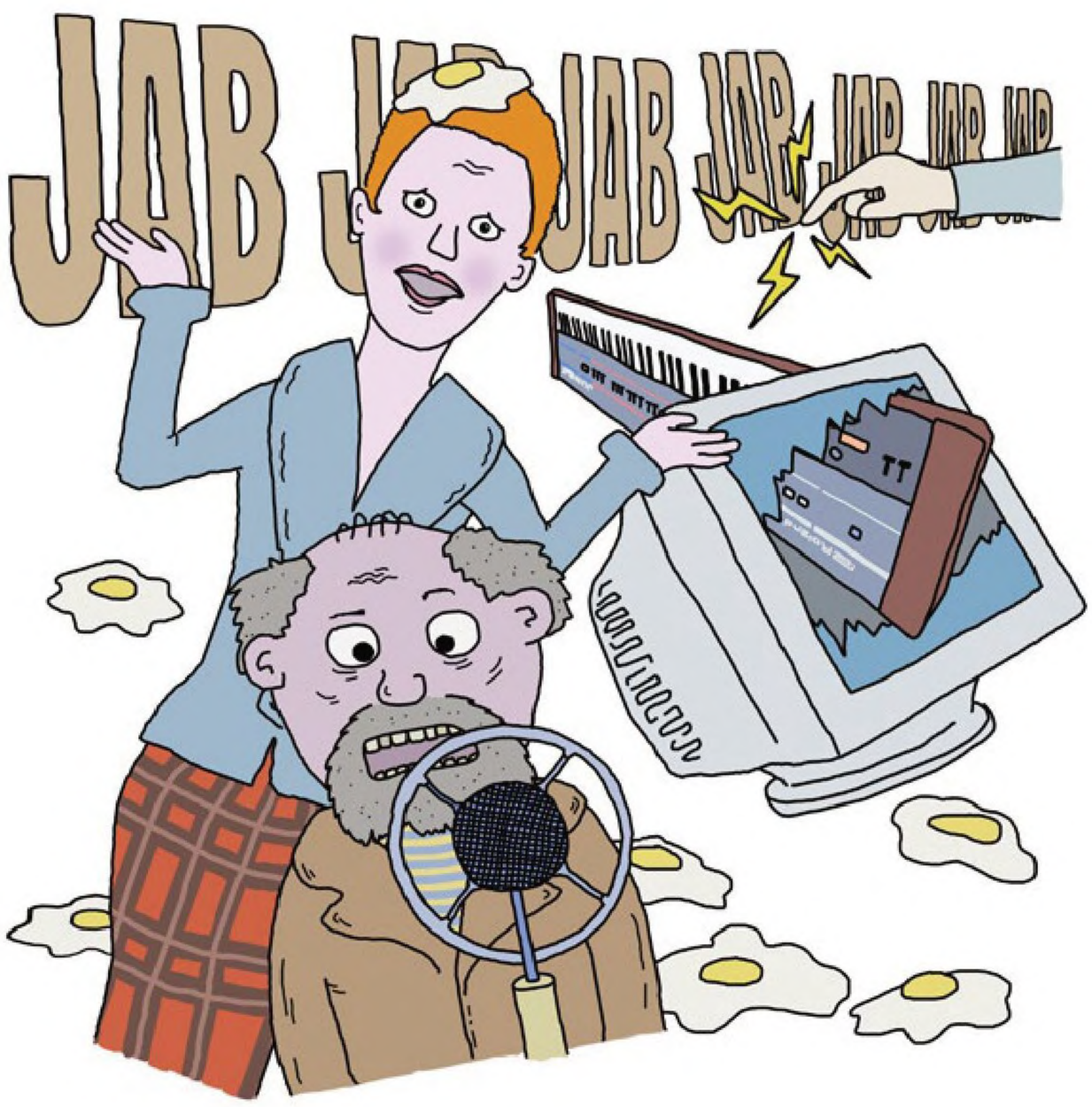
BANGING ON

This month, our intrepid columnist gets to grips with podcasts – or not

WORDS AND PICTURES: FAT ROLAND

I've discovered podcasts. Have you heard of podcasts? I put podcasts on my phone. I've got at least 6,000 podcasts. I unlock my phone and there they are. The podcasts. The thousands of podcasts I haven't listened to. More people should know about podcasts. I think you should discover podcasts just like me. You can put the podcasts on your phone too. And if you don't have a phone, you can, er, put them on a pair of Sony speakers or something. Podcasts. Thousands of podcasts.

Because I'm so ahead of the curve, there's a 100 per cent chance you don't know what a podcast is. I'm an early adopter like Mark Zucklebergs or that woman from 'Tomorrow's World'. Let me explain. There was a time when everyone listened to radio programmes – back in the olden days when everybody was sepia and owned turnips. Families would gather to listen to a stern voice reading the news or a bored voice listing weird words about ships. Late-night radio was always cooler. A beardy old man Sellotaped egg boxes to his walls. He'd waffle into a microphone about the finer details of record players or Van Der Graaf Generator. He'd use words like "sophomore" and "seminal". His voice was silky because of all the eggs he'd eaten.



Podcasts are exactly like that, but without the eggs, the news, the Generator thingy that I googled, the smoothness or the ships. Usually, it's just two loudmouth blokes yelling about their favourite movies. "HAVE U WOTCHED SEVEN? YEH I HAVE WOTCHED SEVEN. ITS GOOD INNIT?" In the middle of sentences, there will be surprise adverts at double the volume for tech start-ups. They'd have names like YesGroin and Future Shafter.

Instead of tuning into a radio station with a big twiddly dial, you find podcasts by jabbing Spotify with an angry finger until you accidentally launch the episode you want. It's really convenient, if the word "convenient" means, "For crap's sake, can someone build a decent audio platform for once".

The first podcast I got into was Spandau Ballet's 'Goldwatch'. On the strength of their 1983 hit 'Gold', they livestream the gold bullion market. It's John Keeble listing prices. It's pretty bad, actually. Pet Shop Boys' podcast is worth a skip too because it's just Chris Lowe and he never says anything. Holly Johnson hosts a quiz show. Two opposing tribes compete, and a point is all that they can score. It's disappointing. Annie Lennox hosts a Q&A one, in which she asks "Why?" repeatedly. Terrible.

What am I saying? Those podcasts are all made-up. Truth be told, I'm not entirely sure what the heck a podcast is. Seriously, though, what is a podcast? Why am I even writing about them? Do you have to sit inside a pod to listen to one? Can you get them on your telly? Is it like Bitcoin but made of noise? I can't keep up with new-fangled digital things. Did you know that instead of having a normal synthesiser with lovely knobs, you can have one in your computer? Inside your actual computer? They open up your computer screen, take out the cathode rays, and bung a Juno-6 in there. It's called a digital audio babestation or something. Apparently, you can make whole albums with these programs because they have, like, at least 12 instruments. Trumpet. Vibraphone. Erm. Another trumpet.

Let's make this column into a podcast. Jab this page. Go on. Jab it with an angry finger. Surely words become noise if you poke them enough.

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Mojo 2

TOWERING ABOVE

Mojo 2's unique digital architecture towers above ordinary chip-DACs. With uniquely powerful processing, the world's first 'UHD DSP', plus class-leading technical performance, Mojo 2 is a landmark product in the audio landscape.

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